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HOW TO USE THE DICTIONARY

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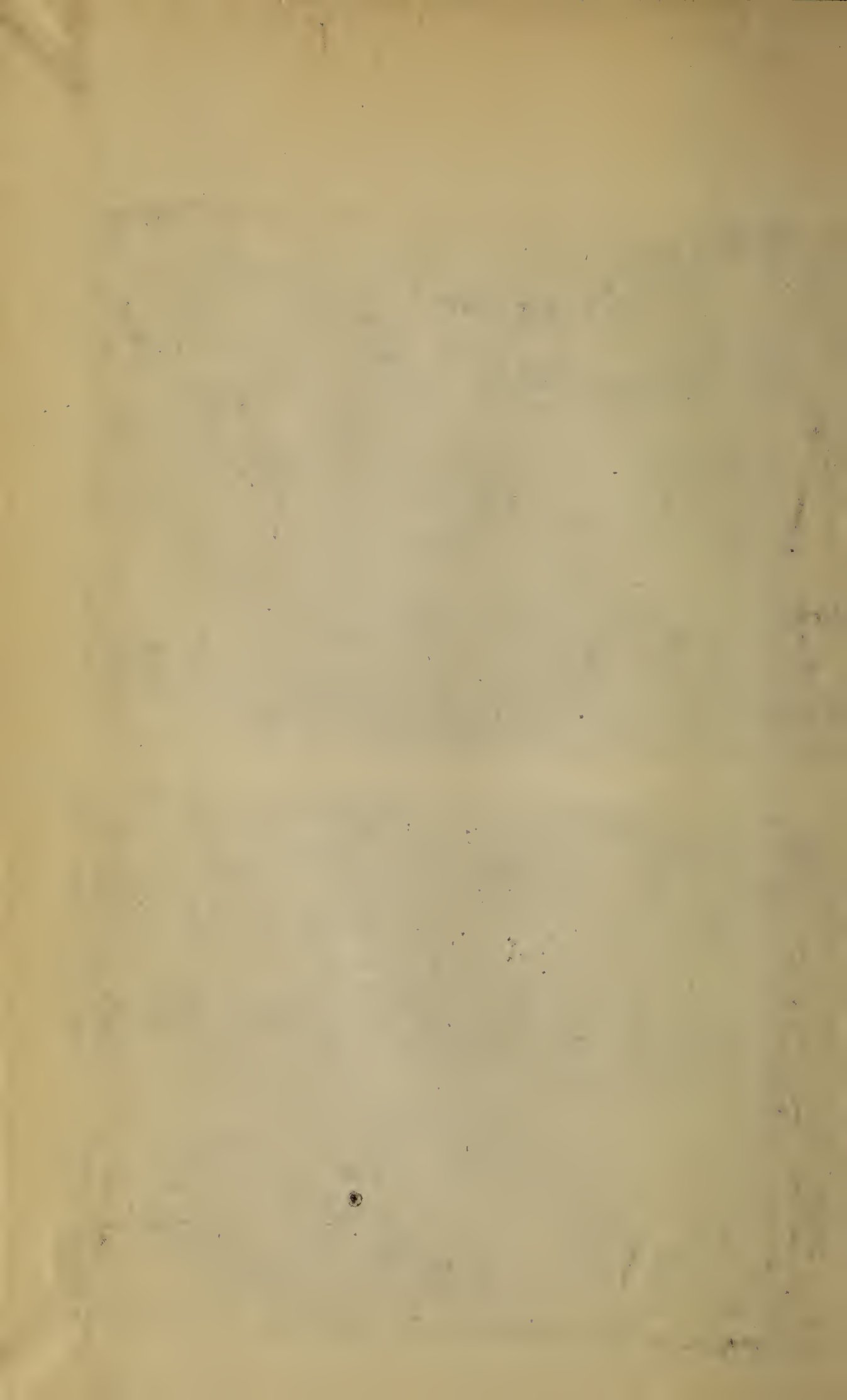
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# HOW TO USE THE DICTIONARY

By

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## PREFACE

In the pages which follow no attempt has been made to deal with the dictionary in a detailed, systematic way. The aim has been to treat the topics considered suggestively rather than exhaustively, and—through the use of concrete illustrations—to call attention to the wide range of questions, linguistic and otherwise, which our reputable dictionaries will answer. 145089

However startling it may appear to outsiders, it is pretty generally conceded among college instructors of English that not one in fifty of the graduates of our high schools has any critical judgment of the worth of our standard dictionaries, or can even interpret intelligently the data which these works lay before him.

In accounting for the neglect of the dictionary in our scheme of general education, three causes stand out prominently. *First*, the use of over-annotated texts which kill the student's initiative and counsel him not to exert himself unduly. *Second*, the permitted use of claptrap dictionaries which foil the reader when they do not mislead him utterly. *Third*, the artificial sequestration of "courses" in our schools which encourages instructors in history, for instance, or in civics, or

in chemistry, to regard exercises involving discrimination in the use of words as a kind of work that belongs exclusively to the "department" of English. As if the vehicle through which knowledge is imparted could ever be a matter of minor importance to those engaged in imparting such knowledge!

As the intelligent use of the dictionary presupposes a knowledge of good use, the attention of the student is especially called to section V, where the principle is set forth in a simple, concrete way. The sections immediately following (sections VI and VII) are concerned with the nearly related matter of idioms—a matter very inadequately treated in most of our text-books on English composition.

It remains for the writer to make grateful acknowledgment of his indebtedness to Lounsbury's "Standard of Usage in English" and to Greenough and Kittredge's "Words and Their Ways in English Speech." His further thanks are due to his colleagues, Professors H. K. Schilling and G. M. Calhoun, of the University of California, for reading the book in manuscript and for many helpful suggestions.

M. C. F.

Berkeley, California,  
December 26, 1922.

## CONTENTS

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	PAGE
I. PRELIMINARY STEPS . . . . .	1
II. CAPITALIZATION AND WORD-DIVISION . . . .	5
III. IRREGULAR AND UNUSUAL FORMS. . . . .	22
IV. WORDS AND PHRASES FROM FOREIGN LAN- GUAGES . . . . .	28
V. OUR STANDARD IN ENGLISH . . . . .	35
VI. IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS . . . . .	43
VII. PROVERBS AND ALLUSIONS . . . . .	60
VIII. IGNORANCE OF DICTIONARY WIDESPREAD . .	63
IX. THE DICTIONARY A BETTER GUIDE THAN PURISTS . . . . .	68
X. NOT ALL DICTIONARIES OF EQUAL VALUE. .	85
XI. THE DICTIONARY OUR MOST COMPREHENSIVE READER'S HANDBOOK . . . . .	101



# HOW TO USE THE DICTIONARY

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## I. PRELIMINARY STEPS

Perhaps no more fundamental advice on the use of the dictionary could be offered beginners than that given by old Robert Cawdray in his preface to what may be considered the first thoroughly English dictionary ever published. In this little volume which appeared in 1604 (more than a hundred years before Samuel Johnson was born) we find the following homely counsel:

If thou be desirous (gentle reader) rightly and readily to understand, and profit by this table, and such like, then thou must learn the alphabet, to wit, the order of the letters as they stand, perfectly without book, and where every letter standeth: as (b) neere the beginning, (n) about the midst, and (t) toward the end.

To many readers this quaint advice of Cawdray's will seem absurdly unnecessary at the present day. Yet since the "word-method" of teaching reading has come into vogue, thousands of school children arrive at a reading knowledge of simple English without being able to repeat the letters of the alphabet in their traditional order.



Even those who have this order firmly fixed in their minds do not always understand that alphabetical sequence means something more than the arrangement of words by their *initial* letters. Such persons—and their number is not wholly confined to school children—make sad work of dictionaries, library catalogues, and indexes generally. The first step, therefore, in the systematic study of the dictionary rests upon a knowledge of alphabetical sequence.

### THE USE OF GUIDE WORDS

As speed and dexterity in consulting reference works are important considerations, the beginner should early be taught to make use of the help offered by the guide words printed at the top of every dictionary page to facilitate reference.

### DIACRITICAL MARKS AND KEY-LINE AS AIDS TO PRONUNCIATION

Of more vital importance, however, is constant drill in assigning the proper value to the various diacritical marks employed to indicate pronunciation. Such drill as is ordinarily given in this connection is woefully inadequate. At present, in the schools, it is almost wholly confined to the early reading lessons where the diacritical marks

are comparatively few and for the most part restricted to vowels. A fact constantly to be borne in mind is that these diacritical markings have merely a relative and not an absolute value. The editors of a dictionary arbitrarily fix the value of these marks, and the values so fixed hold good for that dictionary only. To assume that another dictionary will use these marks to indicate the same sounds is to make a serious mistake. Hence follows the necessity of constant reference to the key-line at the bottom (or at the top) of the page when we consult a dictionary whose phonetic scheme we have not mastered.

### VALUE OF PHONETIC ALPHABET

The difficulty of attaining phonetic precision by a system of diacritical marks alone has led some of our dictionaries to employ a phonetic alphabet in order to insure greater accuracy in indicating pronunciation. It is to be regretted that notwithstanding the simplicity of this latter system and the ease with which it may be mastered, little is being done in the schools to acquaint the next generation of readers with its advantages. Ignorance of the principle of the phonetic alphabet interposes an unnecessary barrier between the reader and the greatest English

dictionary ever published.<sup>1</sup> It likewise prevents the student engaged in private study from freely availing himself of the aid to be derived from the phonetic transcriptions of portions of our literature of the Early and Middle English periods. Knowledge of the phonetic alphabet is, moreover, one of the greatest aids to the acquisition of correct pronunciation in the private study of foreign languages.

The steps which are roughly outlined in the preceding paragraphs and which involve a knowledge of alphabetical sequence, the use of guide-words, the accurate interpretation of diacritical marks, the use of the key-line, and familiarity with the phonetic alphabet, are necessary but elementary steps in the systematic study of the dictionary. More advanced work in this field presupposes a knowledge of the range and scope of the modern dictionary and of the kind of questions which it will directly or indirectly answer.

### SCOPE OF THE MODERN DICTIONARY

Many persons, unwittingly, limit the usefulness of the dictionary, so far as they themselves are concerned, by erroneously assuming that the only questions it will answer are questions concerning:

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<sup>1</sup>The Oxford Dictionary.



1. The spelling
2. The pronunciation
3. The derivation
4. The definition of words

Essential as are these data to word-mastery, they are not the only matters of importance concerning words about which the dictionary may be consulted with profit. Comparatively few persons realize how direct and valuable is the help modern dictionaries afford in resolving troublesome doubts concerning:

5. The capitalization of particular words
6. Syllabication and word-division
7. The use of the hyphen in compounds
8. The forms of inflections of certain words when these forms are irregular or unusual
9. The status of words borrowed from other languages
10. Questions of usage
11. Idioms and idiomatic phrasing
12. Proverbial expressions: allusions

In this discussion, accordingly, passing over the first four points, we may well direct our attention to the other eight, which are far too little considered.

## II. CAPITALIZATION AND WORD-DIVISION

The difficulty of ascertaining the correct practice in the matter of capitalization is one which

frequently confronts the beginner in composition and which, now and then, proves troublesome to writers of wider experience. Text-books of rhetoric and manuals of style attempt to meet the difficulty by laying down a number of "Rules for Capitalization" which, if they could all be remembered, would prove of undoubted service to writers, young or old. But rules learned before experience has enforced the lesson of their value are insecurely held in the memory, and manuals of style are not always conveniently at one's elbow.

Moreover, even a knowledge of these rules will not always secure us against errors of capitalization. The rule, for example, that generally heads the list in most manuals of composition reads: "Capitalize proper names and the words derived from them." This is the usual wording of the rule, yet the exceptions to it are so numerous and so arbitrary that its correct application is often a matter of doubt. The adjective *quixotic*, for instance, is derived from the proper name *Quixote*, yet the established practice is to write it with a small initial letter. The adjectives *machiavellian*, *herculean*, *utopian*, *voltaic*, *stentorian*, *thrasonical*, *epicurean*, *chauvinistic*, *martial*, are all derived from proper names, yet they all begin with small letters.

Nor would it be easy to rephrase the rule so as to include only the examples and exclude the exceptions. This latter point may be made clearer, perhaps, by one or two illustrations. Electrical currents, for instance, have been named after Volta and Ampère, two distinguished investigators. But the adjective *voltaic* calls for a small initial letter, whereas *Amperian* seems to demand a capital *A*. A small initial letter will do when we write of a newly married man as a *benedict*, but a capital *B* appears to lend dignity to the calling of an innkeeper when we refer to him as a *Boniface*. In such phrases as *Rabelaisian* mirth, *Homeric* laughter, *platonian* love, we see a difference in capitalization that is significant of the power of conventional usage in establishing a standard in matters of this kind. A similar difference is noticeable in words like *mentor*, *Nestor*, *jehu*, *Nimrod*, and in current phrases like an *Iliad* of woes, a *jeremiad* of complaints, the *Mecca* of his hopes, a *babel* of voices.

#### THE DICTIONARY AND CONVENTIONAL CAPITALIZATION

Other exceptions to the general rule concerning the capitalization of derivatives from proper names may be seen in words like *berlin*, *brougham*, *victoria*, *phaeton*, *china*, *silesia*, *cash-*

*mere, morocco, davenport, mackintosh, spencer, bluchers, dahlia, fuchsia, guillotine, silhouette, jersey*, etc. Then, too, there is a host of words ending in *-ize*, like *harveyize, macadamize, mesmerize, tantalize, bowdlerize*, etc., all of which, though formed from proper names, are spelled with small initial letters. In short, the exceptions to the general rule are so numerous that it is the part of wisdom for a writer, when in doubt, to consult a good modern dictionary.

The usefulness of the dictionary as a guide in matters of capitalization is not, however, confined merely to the help it affords us in the correct application of the rule we have just been considering. Its assistance may be counted upon when doubts assail us concerning the particular application of almost any other rule for the correct use of capitals. Should the expressions *Reformation, Renaissance, Inquisition, Civil War, Crusade*, be capitalized? If we put this question to the dictionary the answer, by implication, is: "Only when such terms are used as accepted designations of historical epochs or events." Do words like *democratic, republican, liberal, conservative*, call for capitals? Again the answer implied by the dictionary supplies us with the rule: "Only when these terms are used as designations of political parties." The very common



error of writing the words *north*, *east*, *southwest*, etc., with capitals would never be committed if the writers took the trouble to ascertain the accepted practice with regard to these words, as that practice stands recorded in the dictionaries. To be sure, when these words are used as nouns referring to definite sections of the country the initial capital is called for, but the dictionary (by enclosing a capital in parentheses) calls attention to this fact, too. Few of us make mistakes in writing the days of the week, or the months of the year, but many persons seem to believe that the names of the seasons—*spring*, *summer*, *autumn*, *winter*—call for capitals. A glance at the dictionary entries would show this belief to be erroneous. The dictionary, of course, does not set the standard in this or in similar matters. It merely records accepted usage. But this usage is the very thing the inquirer desires to ascertain.

If no book of reference other than a good unabridged dictionary is at hand, we have, in that work, a reliable guide to the correct writing of:

1. Names and titles applied to Deity: *God*, *Messiah*, *Providence*, *Supreme Being*, *Almighty*, etc.; also to words like *Christian*, *Bible*, *Gospel*,<sup>2</sup> *Scripture*.<sup>2</sup>
2. The names of religious denominations or sects, and their adherents: *Catholic*, *Episcopalian*, *Anabaptist*, *Seventh Day Adventists*, *High Churchmen*.

3. The names of schools of philosophy and their adherents: *Epicurean*,<sup>2</sup> *Stoic*,<sup>2</sup> etc.
4. The names of religious orders: *Benedictine*, *Franciscan*, *Capuchin*, etc.
5. The names (in botany and in geology) of classes, families, and genera.
6. The names of books and divisions of the Bible: *Pentateuch*, *Deuteronomy*, *Exodus*, *Psalms*, *Old Testament*, *Prophets*, etc.

The preceding paragraphs summarize twelve of the rules most commonly given for the use of capitals. The summary might easily be extended to include others. But sufficient has been given by way of illustration to indicate the usefulness of the dictionary in the matter of capitalization.<sup>3</sup>

#### SYLLABICATION—WORD-DIVISION

The word "syllabication" has such a formidable look that many practical-minded persons will immediately jump to the conclusion that whatever it stands for can have but little value for them. Yet syllabication is directly connected with three practical everyday matters, viz., spelling, pronunciation, and word-division. It is in its relation to word-division that we intend to consider it here.

<sup>2</sup>These words may be used in senses that do not require the capital. See the dictionary.

<sup>3</sup>Even the rule that calls for the capitalization of the first word in every sentence and the first word in every line of poetry may be found in most dictionaries under the word *capital*, or under the word *capitalization*.

It is scarcely possible to write a letter or an essay, or to draw up a report, without having occasion, here and there in the manuscript, to divide words at the end of lines. The haphazard way in which most writers make this separation has led to the statement that, poor paragraphing excepted, no defect stands out more glaringly in business correspondence—as well as in student themes—than incorrect word-division. It would almost seem as if many students of composition, and most typists, were of the opinion that all the requirements of correct word-division were satisfied by the breaking up of a word into any chance combination of letters that the exigencies of space might require. It is only after reading reams of manuscript that one begins to appreciate how much the legibility of the printed page is due to uniformity of spacing, and to the correct application of rules for dividing words at the end of lines.

Naturally, a matter so important as this finds a place in all our rhetorics, and the rules for word-division laid down in these manuals are of undoubted value to those who can recall them. But as our school days recede these rules grow dim in our memory, though the need for them remains as great as ever. It may, therefore, be of real service to many readers to call attention to the

help the dictionary offers when we have to deal with difficulties in syllabication or with questions involving word-division.

If the reader would test the truth of this last statement, he has only to turn to any of the manuals dealing with word-division and note the rules laid down there for his guidance. Taking up one of the most useful of these handbooks, we find the section on word-division opening with the following statement:

In dividing a word at the end of a line, make the separation between syllables, not elsewhere.

Now that appears to be a very simple and easily applied rule, but is it? How much help does it afford when you are puzzling out the correct division of the words *instructor*, *musical*, *chasm*, *cognac*, *actor*, *debtor*? As a matter of fact, the separation of words into their syllables is one of the most difficult problems with which lexicographers have to deal. Should the reader have any doubt on this point, let him glance at the rules for syllabication given in the Introduction to Webster's New International Dictionary, or ask himself how to apply the following rule which he will find there:

When two or more consonants which may be used together to begin a syllable, come between two sounded vowels, all may be joined to the following vowel when



the preceding vowel is long and accented, or is capable of ending an unaccented syllable, or when the following vowel is an accented syllable. But one of these consonants may be joined to the preceding vowel when this vowel is short, or when the consonants are *st*, *str*, or *sp*, especially if the preceding or following syllable is under an accent.

Even when these rules have been deliberately simplified, their application remains beyond the capacity of any but advanced students. The New Standard Dictionary, for instance, which prides itself upon having accomplished such a simplification, lays down the following as the first of its rules for syllabication:

A consonant or a digraph or a trigraph between two vowels goes into the later syllable when the first vowel is long, half-long, or obscure (except *-er* as in *gen-er-al*).

Let it be granted at once that syllabication is too intricate and involved a matter to be handled with sureness by any except persons of special training. But if this be granted, what is a writer to do when confronted with a difficulty coming under this head. The answer is: Consult the dictionary. In Webster's New International and in Funk & Wagnalls' New Standard Dictionary, every word will be found separated into its syllables.<sup>4</sup> We may turn with the same confidence to the dictionary, therefore, to settle a question

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<sup>4</sup>This useful feature is not to be found in the Century Dictionary.

of syllabication as to settle a question of spelling. And, in most instances, if the syllabication of a word is known the question of division will settle itself. Knowledge of syllabication, or a reference to the dictionary, would save us from committing such errors of division as, *exc-ursion*; *go-ndola*; *univ-ersity*; *diffic-ult*; *secret-ary*.

### PRINCIPLES OF WORD-DIVISION

We should not conclude from this that no difference exists between syllabic division and word-division. The most that can be said is that correct word-division never violates syllabic division. The converse does not hold. An example or two will make this clear. Take the word "antecedent." This word, separated into its syllables, is *an-te-ced-ent*. Consequently, from the standpoint of syllabication any of the following divisions would be permissible: *an-tecedent*, *ante-cedent*, *anteced-ent*. But from the point of view of word-division neither *an-tecedent* nor *anteced-ent* is as acceptable as *ante-cedent*. It is obvious, therefore, that some supplementary principle guides us here in making the correct division. What is that principle?

The rule we are seeking is often worded as follows: In words containing a prefix divide be-

tween the prefix and the letter following it. Thus we have *ante-cedent*, *pre-fix*, *de-light*. Similarly, in words containing a suffix it is customary to divide between the suffix and the letter preceding it. Note, for instance, *lov-ing*, *judg-ment*, *invit-ed*. "But," it may be asked, "if the student remembers this rule, is not reference to the dictionary rendered unnecessary?" The answer is at hand. Among the thousands who are daily confronted with difficulties of this kind, comparatively few can say with any sureness just where a prefix ends or where a suffix begins. And this is just the information the dictionary makes accessible. Moreover, the rule admits of puzzling exceptions. Consider, for instance, the adjective *precedent*, and the noun *precedent*. Both are spelt alike and in both we have the same prefix. But the adjective divides into *pre-cedent*, and the noun divides into *prec-edent*. Or take the words *telling* and *compelling*. Both end with the suffix *ing*, but *telling* separates into *tell-ing*, and *compelling* into *compel-ling*. But the correct usage in these, and in other instances, will be found recorded in the dictionary.

In the "Manual of Style," issued for the guidance of authors and editors, the Riverside Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts) sums up its own scholarly practice in matters of word-division in

the following sentence: "The general rule of the Riverside Press is to follow the divisions in the full-faced type in the Vocabulary of the latest edition of Webster's International Dictionary." In like manner the publishing house of Funk & Wagnalls attains consistency by following the divisions indicated in the New Standard Dictionary.

#### THE USE OF THE HYPHEN IN COMPOUNDS

Questions coming under this head often give rise to peculiar difficulties. Moreover, the inquirer will sometimes find his question answered differently in different dictionaries. This latter fact may favor the assumption that the dictionary is a less dependable guide to correctness in the writing of compounds than it is in other matters of English usage. But such an inference is scarcely justified. "Correctness" in English is conformity to established practice. The different treatment accorded to certain compounds in different dictionaries merely indicates, therefore, that usage is still unsettled so far as those particular words are concerned. In this connection it is significant to notice that the latest editions of our reputable dictionaries show greater uniformity of treatment than was formerly observ-



able. This uniformity of treatment points to a growing uniformity of practice. Where differences still exist, the student has his choice of alternate forms.

The lack of rigid uniformity just noted should not be construed as warranting the wanton use of the hyphen by some writers and the absolute neglect of it by others. How widespread this confusion is the average reader has little means of knowing, since most of the writing which comes under his eye has already been pruned of its vagaries by the trained compositors and proofreaders of the publishing houses. But teachers of composition and also manuscript-readers for the press have a less pleasing prospect spread out before them.

Of course, to the "practical business man" this whole question may seem "academic" and trifling in the extreme. At least this was the view taken of it by one such business man of the writer's acquaintance, until he chanced to learn that, for years past, he had been paying double tolls to the telegraph companies for the transmission of established compounds which should have gone at the single-word rate. The question, thereupon, became suddenly invested with importance, and with an interest which was almost tragic in its intensity.

## IMPORTANCE OF CORRECT HYPHENATION

Where usage is still unsettled, a choice of forms is permitted. But before exercising this privilege the student should first assure himself that such choice is open to him. The only safe way to determine this is to consult the dictionary. With regard to a great number of expressions usage has already become fixed, and any departure from the established form may lead to misinterpretation. This will be the more easily perceived if the student realizes that a compound term becomes invested with a meaning which is not equivalent to the sum of the meanings of the separate words that go to make it up. Take the word *redcoat*. Here we have a compound made up of two separate words, *red* and *coat*. But the meaning of the compound differs very considerably from the meaning of the word-group *red coat*. At one period in our national history a publicly expressed partiality for *redcoats* would lead straight to prison, but at no time in our history was a preference for *red coats* looked upon as an offense. Similarly a *cold-chisel* may be *red-hot* and still remain a *cold-chisel*. Nor is it a contradiction in terms to speak of a *red blackbird*.

The illustrations just given show that in a large class of expressions the elements that enter into

a compound often lose their separate identity and merge themselves into what is practically a new thought-complex. The way in which we write such expressions (*bluejacket*, *greenhouse*) serves notice upon the reader that these expressions are to be regarded as units. This formal unity has a most important bearing upon syntax. If, for instance, through carelessness or ignorance we fail to indicate this unity, the conventional word-order of the sentence may play havoc with our thought. How closely misinterpretation may follow upon the heels of an error of this kind gives point to the story of the London dealer in secondhand goods who announced to a startled world that he had left off clothing of every description. Subsequent investigation by the police showed that his offense was wholly linguistic—he had merely omitted the hyphen in *left-off*.

#### DANGER OF ANALOGY

The student should be warned not to trust too implicitly to his sense of analogy. The word *grandfather*, for instance, would seem to furnish a fairly safe model for the writing of *great-aunt* but, as the reader perceives, one calls for the hyphen and the other does not. Similarly, analogy might mislead us in the writing of words like *beefsteak* and *mutton chop*. These examples

point to one conclusion. They demonstrate that convention in language is of greater force than *a priori* reasoning. Perhaps the time will come when we shall write *muttonchop* just as we write *beefsteak*. But, then again, perhaps that time may never come. Correctness in language rests not so much upon prophetic insight as upon conformity to present usage. This usage may be learned by observation or by consulting the dictionary. If we look up the compound *mutton chop* in Webster's New International, we shall find that it is given in the two-word form; in the New Standard Dictionary it is given as a hyphenated compound. Does this difference indicate that one of the two dictionaries has erred? Not necessarily. Practice in many of these matters is still unsettled. But it is well for the student to remember that, at the present time, the best practice is opposed both to the excessive hyphening of words and to the excessive solidifying of the elements of group-compounds. The opposite tendency may be observed in German where we find such expressions as *Dampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft* and *Madchenpflichtfortbildungsschulen*. Now, our esthetic sense rebels at that kind of thing and we refuse to purchase consistency at the price of it. In English, prevailing practice is based upon the principle that words



should be kept separate when the words have the same meaning in unconnected succession as when joined. Nothing, for instance, is gained by joining the modifiers in such expressions as "*highly-colored wings*," or "*recently-published book*." These expressions when joined have exactly the same meaning as they would have in unconnected succession. But when we speak of a *green house* we have in mind something quite different from a *greenhouse*. Similarly, a *brick yard* and a *brick-yard* are far asunder in meaning.

Loose analogy, as has been intimated, is responsible for some very common mistakes in the use of compounds. There is in good use, for example, the adverb *already*, a compound of *all* and *ready*. Influenced by the form of this compound, writers have sometimes tripped into the error of using *alright*, a word which does not exist. Again, such expressions as *any one*, *every one*, *some one*, etc., are frequently miswritten under the erroneous impression that they should conform to the type of solidified compounds seen in *anybody*, *everybody*, *somebody*, etc. So, too, we often come across false compounds like *anyplace* ("I can't find my hat *anyplace*") modelled upon the form of such accepted compounds as *anywhere*, *everywhere*, *somewhere*. But should the writer have any difficulty in recalling the cor-

rect form, reference to the New Standard, the Century, or the New International, will set him right.

### III. IRREGULAR AND UNUSUAL FORMS

At the dinner which brought to a close a recent teachers' convention, one of the speakers, in illustration of a point he was making, told the old story of the man who, in a letter he was writing, had occasion to use the plural of the word *goose* (in the sense of a tailor's smoothing iron). The letter-writer, so the story runs, had first written: "Send me two tailor's *geese*." This, however, did not seem right and was, consequently, changed so as to read: "Send me two tailor's *gooses*." The second version seemed worse than the first, and successive attempts only added to the failures which soon littered the floor. Finally, in despair he wrote: "Send me a tailor's *goose* and, . . . . it, send me another."

After the speaker had taken his seat one of the listeners turned to his neighbor at the table with the question: "By the way, what is the plural of *goose* in that sense?" The person appealed to replied that he wasn't quite sure but had long cherished the intention of writing to the editor of a well-known educational journal for his "opinion." After others in the immediate vicinity of

the questioner had, in turn, been appealed to, it became evident that the ingenious hero of the narrative was not the only one who had reason to entertain doubts as to the plural of this particular word.

The matter is referred to here, not because it is reprehensible, or even surprising, that persons engaged in teaching should not have known this unusual plural. A person's knowledge of the language is not to be measured by his knowledge of rare and unusual forms. What was surprising, however, was the variety of opinions entertained as to the best method of resolving doubts of this kind. One teacher was for writing to a local newspaper which conducted a "query column." Another was for propounding the question to a noted professor of English literature in one of our universities. A third suggested the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The majority were of the opinion that the point could be hunted down in some comprehensive work on grammar—Goold Brown's, for instance, or Matzner's. No one thought of looking in the dictionary.

Now, if problems of this kind can be dealt with only by having recourse to such roundabout methods of solution, most of us will become reconciled to the thought of dying in our ignorance. It is here that our intimate knowledge of the

limitations of the penny dictionary proves costly, and works to our disadvantage. We unconsciously permit the limitations of the smaller books to set restrictions to the kind of questions we may put to the larger work.

### PLURALS OF FOREIGN ORIGIN

In nouns the inflectional changes which, now and then, give rise to doubts are almost wholly confined to those affecting plurals of foreign origin. Sometimes two plural forms of the same word exist side by side—one with the foreign plural inflection, the other with the regular -s or -es ending of English plurals. Questions as to the correctness of such forms as *memorandums*, *curriculum*s, *criteria*s, *ultimatums*, etc., may be quickly and satisfactorily settled by reference to any good modern dictionary. Half-familiarity with words of this group often leads to a confusion of inflectional forms. Expressions such as, "I cannot accept that as a *criteria*," or, "This *data* was furnished me by a government official," are all too common. Carelessness in reading and slovenly pronunciation often contribute to this kind of error. The forms *dilettante* and *dilettanti*, for instance, are often confused by people who will not take the trouble to distinguish between them in pronunciation. The result is we some-



times meet with a "word" that has not been accorded a place in the language—*dilettantis*.

Among the words of foreign origin which retain their original plurals may be noted the following:

alumnus, alumni	crisis, crises
alumna, alumnae	datum, data
axis, axes	dilettante, dilettanti
bacillus, bacilli	ellipsis, ellipses
bacterium, bacteria	monsieur, messieurs

Other words of this group, while retaining their original plurals, have also a second plural formed after the model of English words; as:

appendix, appendices, or appendixes  
 formula, formulae, or formulas  
 beau, beaux, or beaus  
 stratum, strata, or stratums

The public which spends its money so lavishly for books professing to teach correctness in the use of English, must have an insatiable appetite for information of the kind just given, for these manuals devote a large amount of space to irregular inflections and kindred topics. The strange thing is that so few persons ever buy a good dictionary. The information they seek is all there.

Some time ago one of our well-known scholars returned from a trip through Egypt. Needless to say he was immediately interviewed. In the

course of the interview he gave an amusing account of an experience with two rival *dragomen* of Upper Egypt. A few days later a critic in one of our newspapers sternly rebuked him for employing a false plural. "The error," said his critic, "might be pardoned in a layman, but in a scholar and a linguist, the offense was almost unforgivable." The plural of *dragoman*, the scholar was gravely informed, was *dragomans*, and the use of the word *dragomen* was on a par with the use of *Germen* as the plural of *German*. The traveler was evidently a wise man as well as a scholar, for he made no reply. Had the critic, however, taken the trouble to look up *dragoman* in the Oxford Dictionary he would have found a note to the effect that this word, *from the fourteenth century onward*, has been treated as a compound of the English word *man*. As a result we have a second plural form in common use: *dragomen*.

### OTHER IRREGULAR FORMS

Nouns, however, are not the only parts of speech in which irregularities of form give rise to difficulties. In nearly all the books that concern themselves with questions of correct English we find much space given over to a discussion of the differences between such words as *lie* and *lay*,

*shall* and *will*, *sit* and *set*, etc. Yet in none of these volumes do we find the distinctions made any clearer than they are in our reputable dictionaries. Take, for instance, the following note under the verb *lie* in Webster's New International:

Through ignorance or carelessness speakers and writers often confuse the forms of the two distinct verbs *lay* and *lie*. *Lay* is a transitive verb and has for its preterit *laid*; as, he told me to *lay* it down and I *laid* it down. *Lie* is intransitive and has for its preterit *lay*; as, he told me to *lie* down and I *lay* down. Some persons blunder by using *laid* for the preterit of *lie*; as, he told me to lie down and I laid down. So persons often say incorrectly, the ship *laid* at anchor; they *laid* by during the storm; the book was *laying* on the shelf, etc. It is only necessary to remember, in all such cases, that *laid* is the preterit of *lay*, and not of *lie*.

Notes like these may lie far outside the province of strict lexicography, but they add greatly to the value and the usefulness of the dictionary as a work of general reference on matters pertaining to the use of words. To cite another instance: The word *proven* is in very general use throughout the United States as the past participle of *prove*, yet none of our dictionaries, in giving the principal parts of *prove*, includes this form as an accepted alternative for *proved*. For the word *proven* a separate entry is reserved. In the New Standard Dictionary this entry reads as follows:

**proven**, *pp.* [Archaic.] Proved; an irregular form, confined chiefly to law courts and documents. *Proved* is the true English preterit and past participle of *prove*; *proven* tho an irregular form and originally a Scotticism, and used for *proved* chiefly in law courts and documents, has had wide usage.

It may not be out of place here to call attention to the helpful character of the notes inserted in most of our dictionaries on the correct use of *shall* and *will*.

#### IV. WORDS AND PHRASES FROM FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Many questions of a practical nature concerning the use of words of foreign origin turn, for their answer, upon the extent to which these words have gained admission into standard speech. A novel word or phrase, whether of native or of foreign origin, has to undergo a period of probation before it succeeds in winning for itself an assured place in the language. During this period of probation the new word has to prove that it supplies a real lack in the language or that it is peculiarly fitted for the expression of some special idea. When a word of foreign origin succeeds in passing this test it is said to have become *Anglicized*. What happens when a word becomes Anglicized is not unlike what hap-



pens when an alien becomes naturalized. A naturalized alien forswears allegiance to his mother country, and agrees to obey the laws and to respect the institutions of the country of his adoption. The longer the newcomer resides in the land of his choice and the more sympathetically he enters into the activities and aspirations of the people with whom he has cast his lot, the more difficult it becomes to think of him as a foreigner. His dress, his manner of speech, his way of thinking gradually take on all the characteristics of those among whom he lives.

Now, in a rough sort of way, something like this happens when a foreign word becomes thoroughly Anglicized. It changes its status. It frequently renounces allegiance to the laws of inflection of the language from which it came. When, as an Anglicized word, it makes its appearance on the printed page it discards the italics which formerly drew attention to its foreign birth, and marches side by side with its fellow English words, clothed in the same typographical dress as that in which they make their appearance. Often the naturalized word will shift its original accent so as to conform more closely to the mode of utterance of the language of which it now forms a part. In many cases its former vowel sounds are exchanged for others more in

keeping with the prevailing tone of the speech whose laws it must in future obey.

### QUESTIONS AT ISSUE

Upon the present status of words of foreign origin often depends, therefore, such practical matters as pronunciation, the formation of plurals, the need for the use of italics, etc. And dictionaries render us a service of no small value when, by the use of a symbol, or by an abbreviation, they call our attention to the fact that a word or phrase has not yet been Anglicized. Just what use we can make of this information an illustration or two will, perhaps, make more clear.

Consider, for instance, the often encountered query, Is it correct to write *memorandums*, *criteria*, *curriculum*, *stratums*, and the like? How we answer this question will depend upon how we answer the following question: What is the status in English of *memorandum*, *criterion*, *curriculum*, *stratum*? Have these words been acclimated, naturalized? Have they been incorporated in the language? In short, are they good English words? If we answer this second group of questions in the affirmative, then it is certainly correct to form the plurals of these words after the English fashion and to write *memorandums*, *criteria*, *curriculum*, *stratums*. It does not follow from this

that *memoranda*, *criteria*, *curricula*, *strata*, are wrong. It simply means that, at the present time, we have our choice of forms.

Take a different class of expressions. Should we underscore in writing, *tête-à-tête*, *bric-à-brac*, *a priori*, *prima facie*, *per annum*, *chauffeur*, *connoisseur*, *à propos*, *detour*, *matinée*, etc.? Should these words be italicized in print? Again the answer depends upon the English status of these expressions. And this status will be found indicated in our standard dictionaries. A further question is sometimes asked, the answer to which frequently turns upon the same test. In the writing of Anglicized expressions of foreign origin, is it necessary to transcribe the orthographical signs attached to certain letters in the original word? Should the word *bric-à-brac*, for instance, always carry the grave accent over the first *a*? Should the first *e* in *matinée* be marked with the acute accent? Is it correct to write *tete-a-tete*, *debris*, *depot* (in the approved English use of that word), *apropos*, *clientele*, or should we write *tête-à-tête*, *débris*, *dépôt*, *à propos*, *clientèle*?

#### FOREIGN WORDS AND ENGLISH EQUIVALENTS

The employment of a foreign word or phrase is justified only, (1) when there exists no English

equivalent, or (2) when the borrowed expression has "some special appropriateness of association or allusion" in the sentence in which it stands. The occasions, therefore, on which a writer is forced to have recourse to foreign words and phrases to express his idea must, of necessity, be somewhat rare.<sup>5</sup> The unnecessary or excessive use of expressions of this sort argues, on the part of the person employing them, either an ignorance of the resources of his own tongue, or a silly affectation that often merits the contempt it provokes. Just what may happen if a writer permits himself free indulgence in this form of affectation is burlesqued in the following extracts:<sup>6</sup>

The notes, I may say *en passant*, are full of *recherché* learning, and the whole would be a beautiful *multum in parvo* editing, were it not that its *raison d'être* is hard to discover.

Full of the tricks of the *métier* as is the *précis* which the great *litterateur* here indulges in, it is doubtless a *chef-d'oeuvre* in the skill with which he has brought out every *nuance* of the thought.

From the kind of extravagance illustrated in the quotations just given, the dictionary, of course, is powerless to save us. No book of reference can supply the deficiency caused by the

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<sup>5</sup>*Foreign* words and phrases is the meaning here, not *Anglicized* expressions.

<sup>6</sup>G. R. Carpenter, *Exercises in Rhetoric and English Composition*. New York, Macmillan, 1895.



lack of taste or by absence of common sense. Nevertheless, to those who honestly seek guidance, even in a matter of the kind we are considering, the dictionary affords some help. When, for instance, the dictionary calls attention to the fact that an expression has not yet been Anglicized, it thereby warns us to use more than ordinary caution in employing that particular expression. It practically says: "This word or phrase has not yet been found, by reputable writers and speakers of English, to be indispensable. It is still a question as to whether it supplies a real need in the language. If you use it, therefore, see to it that you have thoroughly good reasons for doing so, and that your preference for it is based upon something sounder than a childish delight in its 'charming foreign accent.' Moreover, as it is still an un-English word, underscore it in writing, and be scrupulously careful not to deprive it of its original accents." All this exhortation the dictionary compresses into a single symbol, or into an abbreviation inclosed in brackets. It then calls our attention to the equivalent English expression and throws the responsibility of the choice upon us.

The danger that lurks in the loose and uncritical use of a borrowed term is aptly illustrated by Professor Brander Matthews in a paragraph



dealing with a word frequently met with in the newspapers nowadays, and frequently misused—the French word *née*. Professor Matthews writes thus:

The French have found a way out of the difficulty of indicating easily the maiden name of a married woman; they write unhesitatingly about Madame Machin, *née* Chose; and the Germans have a like idiom. But instead of taking a hint from the French and the Germans, and thus of speaking about Mrs. Brown, *born* Gray, as they do, not a few English writers have frequently borrowed the actual French word, and so we read about Mrs. Black, *née* White. As usual this borrowing is dangerous; and the temptation seems to be irresistible to destroy the exact meaning of *née* by using it in the sense of “formerly.” Thus in the “Letters of Matthew Arnold, 1848-88,” collected and arranged by Mr. George W. E. Russell, the editor supplies in foot-notes information about the persons whose names appear in the correspondence. In one of these annotations we read that the wife of Sir Anthony de Rothschild was “*née* Louise Montefiore” . . . . , and in another that the Hon. Mrs. Eliot Yorke was “*née* Annie de Rothschild.” . . . . Now, neither of these ladies was *born* with a given name as well as a family name. It is evident that the editor has chosen arbitrarily to wrench the meaning of *née* to suit his own convenience, a proceeding of which I venture to think that Matthew Arnold himself would certainly have disapproved. In fact, I doubt if Mr. Russell is not here guilty of an absurdity almost as obvious as that charged against a wealthy western lady now residing at the capital of the United States, who is said to have written her name on the register of a New York hotel thus: “Mrs. Blank, Washington, *nee* Chicago.”

## V. OUR STANDARD IN ENGLISH

When we say of an expression that it is "poor English," or that it is "incorrect," we imply that we have in our minds a *standard* of judgment. In the absence of a standard a thing can be neither "correct" nor "incorrect," neither "right" nor "wrong." "Correctness" is conformity to an accepted standard; "incorrectness" is a departure from such a standard. If we had no standard, or if, in language, every man were a law unto himself, the sentence, "When I sees him coming I goes out the back door and down the steps," would be quite as worthy of preservation, so far as form is concerned, as any sentence in the Gettysburg Address.

That we have a standard in language is therefore evident. What that standard is called, upon what it is based, and just what relation exists between it and the dictionaries, are matters we shall discuss in the next few paragraphs.

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## GOOD USE DEFINED

Our criterion in English, the test which we apply to a word or to a locution to determine its fitness, is known as the "principle of good use," or the "standard of usage." If the real nature of this standard were more generally understood it would win support in many quarters

where, today, it meets with a kind of dogged opposition. This opposition is based upon the assumption that the principle of good use is the invention of a little coterie of grammarians and literary dilettanti who seek to impose their own standard of fastidious correctness upon a reluctant public. If this assumption were correct, allegiance to good use would result in a stilted and affected mode of speech. But the assumption is incorrect, and the inference based upon it goes wide of the truth. The standard of usage is not an artificial code of rules set up by schoolmasters to be enforced in classrooms. Neither is it the invention of grammarians or rhetoricians. In fact, grammarians and rhetoricians have as little to do with deciding what good use shall be, as the compilers of a city directory have to do with deciding where you shall live. The compilers of a directory ascertain where you live, and then record what they find out in a book called a directory. Similarly, it is the duty of grammarians, rhetoricians, and lexicographers to ascertain what is the accepted usage among educated people and then severally to record what they find in the books which we call grammars, rhetorics, and dictionaries, respectively. Good use, therefore, is something that exists independently of the individual preferences of gram-

marians and the makers of dictionaries, just as the facts of history exist independently of historians, whose duty it is first to ascertain and then to record them.

Upon what, then, is the principle of good use based, if the personal preferences of grammarians and lexicographers have nothing to do with it? To put it briefly, good use is based upon the practice of the educated among our contemporaries. If a more detailed definition is called for, perhaps we cannot do better than quote that given by Professor Carpenter: "Good use is the principle that commends the use of words [and constructions] which reputable speakers and writers of our own nation and our own time as a body understand and approve."<sup>7</sup>

### ELEMENTS OF GOOD USE

In the definition just quoted we see that good use must possess three marks or characteristics:

1. It must be the usage of *our own time*; i.e., it must be *Present Use*.
2. It must be the usage of *our own nation*; i.e., it must be *National Use*.
3. It must be the usage of *reputable speakers and writers*; i.e., it must be *Reputable Use*.

We shall consider each of these elements sepa-

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<sup>7</sup>G. R. Carpenter, *Exercises in Rhetoric and Composition* (Advanced Course). New York, Macmillan, 1895.



rately and shall note what light the dictionary throws upon each.

### PRESENT USE

A living language is constantly growing and changing. New words are continually coming into existence, some of the older words are gradually falling into disuse, and others still are taking on new meanings. And as the language changes, so does the standard of use. Many of the words and constructions that were in good use in Chaucer's day were already obsolete in the time of Shakespeare, and the standard of usage in Shakespeare's day is no longer a guide to correctness at the present moment. Good use demands that we give to words the value they have among our contemporaries. The word *knave* in Shakespeare's time, for instance, might be used as a synonym for *servant*. But to advertise a servant nowadays as a knave would be to invite a suit for damages. Good use, therefore, disapproves, in ordinary discourse, of the employment of archaic words, or of expressions that have become obsolete. And in ascertaining present use the dictionary is our best and surest guide, as it calls our attention (through the use of suitable abbreviations) to words that are *obsolete*, *archaic*, *rare*, etc.



## NATIONAL USE

Frequently a word or an expression will have a wide currency in a particular locality, or among the followers of a particular trade or profession, but this currency should not be mistaken for national usage. "I reckon he feels right well this morning," is a sentence that to thousands of persons in certain sections of our country may appear to be a perfectly adequate and correct phrasing of the thought meant to be conveyed. Yet, in another section, such a mode of expression would arrest attention as quickly as a foreign accent. In other words, the use of the term "reckon," in the sense of "think" or "believe," is local rather than national. Other well-known examples of localisms are evident in the use of *right* for *very*, *calculate* for *think* or *conjecture*, *folks* for *family* or *relatives*.

In its larger and more important features the standard of usage in America is identical with the standard of usage in Great Britain. In a few minor points, however, there is a difference between the two in *national* usage. What we call an *elevator* in America is called a *lift* in England. *Lift-man* is the British equivalent for *elevator-man*; *booking-office* for *ticket-office*; *luggage* for *baggage*; *goods train* for *freight train*; and so on. These British expressions are neither better nor

worse than their American equivalents. They are merely different. But one of the essentials of good use is that it be *national*. In this country, therefore, it would be a violation of good use to substitute terms like *lift*, *lift-man*, *booking-office*, etc., for their American equivalents.

Other violations of national use occur when foreign words or phrases, or technical terms, are unnecessarily employed. The most common offenses against the national standard are indicated in the dictionary by the abbreviations (*Prov.*) and (*Dial.*) which signify *provincial*, *dialectical*. Technical terms that have not yet won a place for themselves in the general vocabulary are marked (*Naut.*), *nautical*; (*Biol.*), *biological*; (*Mus.*), *musical*; etc. Un-Anglicized expressions from foreign sources are distinguished from other entries by the use of a symbol, or by being printed in different type, or by the abbreviations *Ger.* (*German*); *Fr.* (*French*); *Ital.* (*Italian*); etc. British usage as distinguished from American is marked *Eng.* (*England*); *Gt. Br.* (*Great Britain*).

#### REPUTABLE USE

Sometimes an expression will satisfy two of the requirements of good use but will fail to satisfy the third. The word "ain't," for example, is in

*present* use, and in *national* use; i.e, it is not confined to any particular section of the country. The word, however, does not conform to the standard because it is not used by *reputable* writers and speakers—it is not in general use among the educated. The same is true of the word “guess” when this word is used as the equivalent of “think.” The commonest source of offenses against reputable usage, however, is to be found in slang—that “peculiar kind of vagabond language always hanging on the outskirts of legitimate speech.”<sup>8</sup> To indicate words not in reputable use the dictionary employs, in addition to some of the abbreviations already given, the words *low*, *vulgar*, *slang*, etc.

### GOOD USE AND THE DICTIONARY

We see now what is meant when we speak of good use as being present, reputable, and national use. We see, too, in determining questions of usage, how valuable may be the help which the modern dictionary stands ready to give, if we but know how to interpret the information it lays before us. For this kind of assistance, however, we should never resort to the small cheap dictionaries published by enterprising job-printers

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<sup>8</sup>Greenough and Kittredge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech*.

and thoughtlessly recommended to school children. It is scarcely necessary to add that the larger dictionaries issued by publishers of this class are equally unsatisfactory.

To imply that all questions involving the principle of good use can be settled mechanically by reference to the dictionary would be absurd. Such finality is possible only in the case of a dead language. To say this, however, is merely to say that we must bring intelligence to bear in interpreting the facts which the dictionary lays before us. Our standard in rhetoric is relative rather than absolute. Questions involving good use do not always present us with the choice of a flat alternative between what is right and what is wrong. Most frequently the issue raised involves the question: Which is preferable?—which is the more effective?

It should be borne in mind that good use rests upon broad foundations. No individual, however eminent he may be in literature, in science, or in public life, can arbitrarily set the standard in matters of usage. Not all Carlyle's genius, for instance, could give general currency to some of the words and constructions that appealed most strongly to him. As a result, many of the terms he used remain outside the limits of standard English, and are forced to consort with "the vaga-



bonds that hang on the outskirts of legitimate speech.” Good use, therefore, can never be absolutely determined by an appeal to a single author.

From what has been said it must be evident that the inclusion of a word in the dictionary does not mean that that particular word is in good use. The dictionary aims to aid us in the *interpretation* as well as in the *expression* of thought. Hence, it is a record of, practically, all the words in the language. In our reputable dictionaries this record is edited by scholars, so that it is, generally speaking, a dependable guide in matters pertaining to correct usage. And the maintenance of this standard is not merely a “literary” matter. About it center larger social and political issues than most people are aware of. This is especially true in the United States, a country which in area covers more than three million square miles and which is inhabited by a people neither racially nor linguistically homogeneous.

## VI. IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

In the preceding section we pointed out the relation that exists between the principle of good use and the dictionary. Most of the illustrations, however, were designed to show how the application of that principle guides us in our choice



of particular words. But usage has to do not only with words considered singly, but also with the way in which these words are combined in phrases and sentences. To put it briefly, good use is a matter of grammar as well as of rhetoric. Generally speaking, whenever a rule of grammar is broken, the breach involves a violation of good use. To this general rule there is, however, an interesting class of exceptions which are known as "idioms."

Idioms are forms of expression peculiar to a language, often at variance with strict grammar but having the sanction of usage. Of course, not every idiom runs counter to grammar but, as Professor Earle remarks, "The idiomatic principle is not seen in full force so long as we can reconcile the idiom with grammatical rules." The propriety of an idiom, therefore, cannot be successfully challenged on grammatical grounds. In other words, an idiom is a form of expression which, through long-continued use, has gained a prescriptive right to take precedence over the rules of formal grammar.

#### NEGLECT OF IDIOMS

English abounds in idioms, many of them "sturdy survivals from some former stage of the language, stubborn old features which have re-

sisted the levelling operation of progress, whose stronghold lies in that instinct that makes old associations dear. They are siftings of old Time, precious relics of past conditions of the mother tongue." Much of the subtle appeal and the telling picturesqueness of our best prose is due to the happy employment of these turns of expression and to the use of phrases consciously or instinctively modelled upon them. Yet in the formal teaching of English Composition there is, perhaps, no field of equal importance so persistently neglected as that which includes the study of these peculiarities of our speech.

This neglect may be traced to several causes. *First*, the grammatical irregularity of some of our idioms causes them to be viewed with suspicion by school grammarians who distrust them "because they will not parse." *Second*, there is a widespread tendency to identify "correctness" of speech with strict conformity to the standard of formal written discourse. *Third*, the fact that the words entering into an idiom do not always, if considered separately, give us a clew to its meaning, has prevented these expressions from gaining currency among hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens to whom the English language has come as an acquisition rather than as an inheritance.

## IDIOMS AND THE PURISTS

Two well-established idiomatic forms that have long been under fire are seen in the phrases *had better*, *had rather*. So determined have been the attacks made upon these locutions by purists that even persons of intelligence have permitted themselves to be intimidated. What is more significant is that the arguments of the purists have invaded our schools, and pupils are being taught to avoid *had rather* and *had better*, and to substitute for them *would rather* and *would better*.

Nor are these attacks always led by obscure grammarians. Every now and then the cause of the purists will gain additional strength by the support given it by individuals whose reputations and achievements entitle them to be heard with respectful consideration. A case in point is furnished by the publication, some time ago, of a little manual of style, the work of a writer<sup>9</sup> of unquestioned ability. The aim of the book, according to the preface, is "to teach precision in writing," and to that end the author has drawn up a list of expressions to be avoided. Early in the list the reader will come across the following entry:

**had better** for **would better**. This is not defensible

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<sup>9</sup> Ambrose Bierce, *Write it Right: A Little Blacklist of Literary Faults*.

as an idiom, as those who always used it before their attention was directed to it take the trouble to point out. It comes of such contractions as *he'd* for *he would*, *I'd* for *I would*. These clipped words are erroneously restored as "he had," "I had." So we have such monstrosities as "He had better beware," "I had better go."

But the question cannot be disposed of so cavalierly. As a matter of fact, the theory so confidently propounded in the paragraph just quoted is held by competent scholars to be little better than a weak effort of the fancy. The expression *had better* has a long and interesting history, and any adequate explanation of it must be content to follow patiently in the wake of ascertained facts. The story of this idiom has been told at length in a scholarly article contributed by the late Fitzedward Hall to the *American Journal of Philology*.<sup>10</sup> This article has been summarized by the editors of the *Oxford Dictionary* and may be found in that work under *have* 22.

What acknowledged authorities think of these "fussy" attacks upon well-established idioms the reader may ascertain for himself by consulting Professor Lounsbury's "The Standard of Usage in English," or Greenough and Kittredge's "Words and Their Ways in English Speech." In the latter volume the authors, after noting the determined

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<sup>10</sup> Vol. II, pages 281-322.



attempts made by purists to stigmatize *had rather* and *had better* as incorrect and to substitute for them *would rather* and *would better*, go on to say:

The idiom, however, is perfectly established, has been in use for centuries, and is habitually employed by the best writers. In some cases the substitution of *I would* results in downright error. Thus, "I would better go" is positively ungrammatical. . . .

In the case of idioms like "I had better" one frequently hears the objection that *had* "will not parse." As a matter of fact, it *will* parse, easily enough, if one knows how to parse it. But the objection would have no validity even if the phrases were grammatically inexplicable. The grammarian has no business to object to an established idiom, for idioms are superior to paradigms and analytical diagrams. Grammar was made (pretty imperfectly) from language, not language from grammar.

### IDIOMS AND THE DICTIONARY

It would, of course, be taking too much for granted to expect the reader always to know in what particular volume he will find specific questions of disputed usage discussed. Besides, difficulties of the kind we are discussing usually arise at most inopportune moments—when one is half-way through a letter, for instance, or in the middle of a report. At such a moment we have neither the time nor the inclination to read a long disquisition on quaint historical survivals which have the sanction of usage. What would be welcomed, however, is a brief authoritative decision



on the correctness or the incorrectness of a particular expression. Such a statement, in a majority of instances, may be found in our reputable dictionaries.

Let us test this last statement by putting a question to the dictionary as to the correctness of *had rather*, *had better*, etc. On opening the New International at *have v.t.*, we find a note to the following effect:

Had is used, especially in poetry, for *would have* or *should have*, and for *would* or *would have* with adjectives, adverbs, or phrases of comparison, as, *as well*, *as good*, *as lief*, *rather*, *better*, *liefer*, *best*, *liefest*, and the like, to indicate preference or advisability. "We *had better* leave her." C. Bronte. The original construction was that of the dative with forms of *be*, followed by the infinitive.

Then follows a series of quotations illustrating the use of this idiom in different forms from the year 1320 down to the seventeenth century.

The New Standard Dictionary is quite as explicit though there are fewer illustrative quotations.

Coming back now to Mr. Bierce's volume and reading farther we find the following:

**insane asylum.** Obviously an asylum cannot be unsound of mind. Say, asylum for the insane.

Here again we are dealing with an idiomatic construction against which "obvious" logic cannot prevail. Let the reader glance at the follow-

ing sentence: "When the doctor entered the sick room he noticed that the nurse had been weeping." No one would think of questioning the propriety of the expression *sick room* on the ground that a room could not possibly be in feeble health. Yet the two phrases *insane asylum* and *sick room* illustrate the same idiomatic construction. Under the word *insane* in the dictionary is the following entry:

Used by, or appropriated to, insane persons; as an *insane* hospital.

This is all the information a reader needs for using the phrase correctly, though if he is more curious he should consult the Oxford Dictionary, where he will find the syntax discussed and the objection embodied in Mr. Bierce's note squarely faced and met.

### THE DOUBLE POSSESSIVE

Another idiom which seems natural to most persons, but which has long proved a thorn in the side of the purist, is exemplified in the use of the "double possessive" or, as it is sometimes called, the "cumulative genitive." In the sentence, "Any friend *of Wilson's* is welcome," we have the two forms of the genitive, the phrasal *of Wilson*, and the flexional 's. This use has frequently been questioned. In the New Inter-

national Dictionary the note under the entry *possessive* reads:

**possessive case**, Gram. English idiom allows a double possessive expression with both *of* and the possessive inflection ('s) . . . . .

### ARCHAISMS IN IDIOMS

To employ an obsolete or archaic word in ordinary discourse is to offend against the principle of good use. Nevertheless, if an obsolete or archaic word forms part of a current idiom, the ban against its use is, to that extent, removed. The precedence which idioms are entitled to take over the rules of grammar and of rhetoric, enables them to carry over into the living present something of the picturesqueness of times long since passed. This precedence sufficiently accounts for the fact that an editorial writer in the morning's paper can, without impropriety, express himself as follows: "In contending for the right of American ships to traverse *without let or hindrance* the highways of ocean traffic, President Wilson is at the same time contending," etc. In the idiomatic phrase *without let or hindrance* the word *let* is used in a sense that has long been obsolete—in a sense diametrically opposed to the meaning we now associate with it. Today we use the word *let* in the sense of "to permit," "to

allow." In Shakespeare's day, and for centuries earlier, it meant also, "to prevent," "to hinder." In its old substantive sense the word meant "hindrance," "impediment," "delay." The use of the word in this latter sense today would, *except in the idiom just noted*, be a "barbarism," i.e., an offense against good use. The dictionary, although it has not space for elaborate explanations, nevertheless puts the reader in possession of the essential facts, so far as use is concerned, when it briefly remarks:

**let, *n.*** 1. A retarding; hindrance, obstacle; impediment, delay;—common in the phrase without let or hindrance, but elsewhere archaic.<sup>11</sup>

### THE IDIOM A LINGUISTIC FORMULA

Typical idioms strikingly illustrate the fact—a fact often overlooked by teachers of composition—that the unit of expression is the phrase rather than the single word. An idiom is really a linguistic formula. Its meaning, as we have said, cannot always be made out by piecing together the separate words that enter into it. A person with a very elementary knowledge of syntax can easily make out the meaning of the sentence, "The book is on the table," provided he knows the meaning of the words *book*, *on*, *table*, etc.

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<sup>11</sup> Webster's New International Dictionary.



But in the sentence, "Here's a pretty kettle of fish," the words taken separately give us absolutely no clue to the meaning of the whole. The person who would seek to unlock the meaning of this formula by substituting verbal equivalents for *pretty*, *kettle*, *fish*, would find himself—to use a Macaulayan simile—in a position similar to that of Cassim in the Arabian tale who kept crying "Open Wheat!" "Open Barley!" to the door that would respond only to "Open Sesame!"

English is rich in idioms of the kind we are here considering. Sometimes they are irregular in form; at other times they are perfectly regular so far as form is concerned, but have arbitrary meanings imposed upon them. In any case they have the sanction of usage. *Idiomatic English is good English*. Failure to understand this is what renders so absurd the attitude of purists who solemnly insist upon stalking these locutions with a syllogism in one hand and a rule of syntax in the other.

Of idioms it may sometimes be said that their meaning does not lie close to the surface. This holds true of even familiar expressions in common daily use. "I know I shall be late *but I can't help it*." Here, the meaning of the italicized phrase is scarcely to be inferred from the meaning of the words that enter into it. In fact the word

*help* in this connection is used in the sense of "hinder," "prevent"—a sense strikingly opposed to its ordinary meaning.<sup>12</sup> "This is a nice how-do-you-do," is a perfectly intelligible expression; yet if we were called upon to make plain its meaning, we should be forced to employ words not even remotely suggested by the expression itself. "Did your guest arrive?" "Oh *dear*, yes, and his dog too, *if you please*." Here, again, the italicized phrases represent idiomatic usage, and the play of irony in the reply is scarcely to be caught or to be rendered so economically by any other grouping of words. Similarly, the meaning of the phrase "to send a man about his business" is not to be arrived at if we take the word *business* in its ordinary sense. Instances could easily be multiplied but the examples already given amply demonstrate that the idiomatic phrase must be viewed as a unit, and that the meaning of this unit can not always be inferred from the meaning of its parts.

### SLANG AND IDIOM

The ruggedness of some of our idioms and the homely garb they often wear frequently causes them to be confounded with slang. Nor is this mistake confined to the ranks of unenlightened

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<sup>12</sup> Sweet, *A New English Grammar*, page 448.

laymen. Too often it may be met with among professional teachers of English. Yet slang and idiom may be as far apart as the poles. Generally speaking, idioms are old, so old that they have worn deep ruts in the language. Slang, on the other hand, is new, so new that its approaching and receding waves are well within the vision of the persons who use it. Idioms, again, have the sanction of good use, whereas slang lies outside the limits of legitimate speech.

To draw up only a partial list of current idioms would fill a good-sized book in itself. A few examples here, however, may not be out of place. In the following short list the italicized expressions indicate idiomatic usage.

### SOME CURRENT IDIOMS

The judge refused to *put up with* his insolence.  
 This is quite *of a piece* with his former conduct.  
 In *point of fact* no such evidence was given.  
*For my part* I refused to accept.  
 Not only was he dismissed, but he received a box on the  
     *ear into the bargain*.  
 This fact was never once *called in question*.  
 He refused *point blank*.  
 We were *struck* with his appearance.  
 He *set up* for an authority on the subject.  
 The crime was at last *brought home* to him.  
 They said they were going away *for good*.  
 The accused spoke *under his breath*.  
 There they lay *cheek by jowl*, equal at last in death.

He *cut a poor figure* at the hearing.  
 Prosperity *turned their heads*.  
 The boy managed *to set everybody by the ears*.  
 They *fell in with* him on the road.  
 The president sent him away with *a flea in his ear*.  
 He *hit upon* a new plan.  
 It *stands to reason* that the plot will miscarry.  
 He sought to gain his end *by hook or crook*.  
 I have *made up my mind* to go.  
 She *puts me in mind* of her mother.  
 I *have a great mind* to dismiss him.  
 It doesn't pay *in the long run*.  
 She couldn't *get over* his insolence.  
 The prisoner has escaped, and is still *at large*.  
 They *pressed* him to remain.  
 The ship failed *to weather the storm*.  
 It was *every whit as good* as the one he accepted.  
*What with* rain and wind, the weather could scarcely be worse.<sup>13</sup>

### THE IDIOMATIC USE OF PREPOSITIONS

For our present purpose we will take "idiomatic phrasing" to mean the grouping of words into combinations which have the sanction of long-continued use. Disregard for these traditional combinations leads to a kind of error very common in English—an error somewhat difficult to combat because it does not fall within the field of school-taught grammar. Offenses against idiomatic phrasing show themselves frequently in the

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<sup>13</sup> One of the most crying educational needs of the day is for a good school dictionary in which current English idioms will receive adequate treatment.



choice of the wrong preposition. Custom, for instance, has decreed that the following combinations should be respected: <sup>14</sup>

abhorrence of	bestow upon
absolve from	comply with
accord with	confer on <i>or</i> upon (give to)
adapted to <i>or</i> for	confer with (talk to)
agree with (a person)	confide in (trust in)
agree to (a proposal)	confide to (intrust to)
averse from <i>or</i> to	conform to <i>or</i> with

Idiomatic phrases in which prepositions play a part are so numerous that it would be impossible to list them all here. Nor can definite rules be laid down to guide one in making the traditional combinations. To meet the difficulty, text-books of rhetoric blandly advise the student to cultivate a sense for the niceties of diction and then to read widely in the masterpieces of literature. As a piece of general advice this can scarcely be bettered. Nevertheless, to proffer it to a writer face to face with some particular difficulty savors somewhat of irony. Counsel less lofty, indeed, but more practical, might take the form of directing the inquirer's attention to the very immediate help the dictionary offers in matters of this kind. In the latest editions of our best dictionaries many of the commonly encountered difficulties in

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<sup>14</sup>Quoted from A. S. Hill's *Foundations of Rhetoric*.

the idiomatic use of prepositions have been anticipated and the approved usage indicated.

### PRACTICAL COUNSEL

Of the very practical form this assistance takes the average reader has little conception, though it is just the kind of assistance of which he often stands in need. That the need for guidance in this direction is pretty widely felt is evidenced by the great number of questions that are continually being asked concerning the correctness of these prepositional constructions. The "query editors" of magazines are deluged with them. Instructors in English encounter them at every turn, and no text-book on composition is now considered complete that does not set aside space for their discussion and elucidation. One inquirer writes to the editor of a magazine to ask if the expression, "He blamed it *on* me," is correct, and quotes a line from Kipling's "If" to show that the construction is employed by that author. Another desires to know whether *averse* should be followed by *to* or *from*. A third is in doubt as to whether the word *sympathy* should be followed by *for* or *with* in the sentence, "He had no sympathy for the poor."

The significant thing about these inquiries is that they come from persons who represent

widely different degrees of literary culture. Indeed, in the latest number of the Literary Supplement of the London *Times* to reach me at this writing, I find the following sentence: "She [Madam Lebrun] still remains a favorite painter whose works are familiar with [sic] many to whom names much more considerable in art signify little or nothing." Now when a learned reviewer in one of the foremost literary journals in the world can trip like that it is small wonder that the man in the street stumbles.

To complicate matters, some of our self-appointed guides in this field are not always trustworthy. For instance, in a book which appeared recently—a book devoted wholly to grammar and to English Composition<sup>15</sup>—the author warns his readers against using the phrase "under the circumstances." The correct phrase, he urges, is "*in* the circumstances" and the reason given is as follows: In the word *circumstances*, *circum* means "around," "round about." "Therefore," says the author, "things that stand round us cannot be over us, nor can we be under them"! But questions of use cannot be settled by etymological data or by recourse to abstract reasoning. In the present instance reference to any of our leading dictionaries would prove far more satisfac-

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<sup>15</sup>R. S. Bate, *English Composition*. London, George Bell & Sons.

tory. The Oxford Dictionary, for example, gives both phrases and distinguishes between them as follows:

Mere situation is expressed by "*in* the circumstances"; action affected is performed "*under* the circumstances."

## VII. PROVERBS AND ALLUSIONS

By an association of ideas not difficult to understand, the consideration of idiomatic phrases leads naturally enough to a consideration of proverbial expressions. Between these two forms of expression there is no necessary connection, though the genius of the language will often give a peculiar turn to the form of a proverb and, in this manner, identify it with idiom. Superficially, the proverbial phrase has many points in common with the idiomatic. Both, for instance, speak of the past, and often point to a remote ancestry. Again, they sometimes resemble each other in the rugged picturesqueness of their garb and in the homely directness of their meaning. Both, too, owe much to the universality of their appeal, which includes the lettered and the unlettered alike.

It would seem, indeed, as if a proverb scarcely called for a commentary, yet even a short experience in any school classroom will disclose the danger of taking too much for granted. Actual



questioning has shown that even so old an adage as "Good wine needs no bush," often leaves college freshmen sorely puzzled; and the unwisdom of buying *a pig in a poke* is not at all obvious to those who have not the faintest conception of what a *poke* is. Nor is it to be greatly wondered at that, in this melting pot of the nations, proverbs and allusions which earlier in our national life were accepted at their face value have now but little popular currency. This is especially true of those expressions which still retain something of their original color. The futility of *carrying coals to Newcastle*, the punishment involved in *sending a person to Coventry*, the option open to one who is presented with *Hobson's choice*, no longer declare themselves as a matter of course.

#### NEED OF UNDERSTANDING ALLUSIONS

But more perplexing to the average reader than the proverb is the allusion. Yet it is scarcely possible in these days to pick up a book, a newspaper, or a magazine, and read a dozen consecutive pages without encountering one or more of these indirect references to persons, or fables, or proverbs, or situations, or what not. They form no inconsiderable part of the common heritage of the race, and in subtle ways influence the na-

tion's thinking and promote the feeling of national unity. Familiarity with these allusions, therefore, forms not merely a desirable, but a very necessary part of the equipment of every student. Our method of teaching reading in the schools has left generations of readers under the impression that there is a chosen people in the land of letters to whom the significance of allusions is divinely revealed, and that this people (generically known as editors) transmits the revelation through the medium of foot-notes.

Many will learn with surprise that a wide range of allusions—Biblical, historical, proverbial, literary—is covered by the dictionary. One need scarcely go beyond that source of information to ascertain the meaning of such expressions and allusions as:

to bell the cat	juggernaut
a rift in the lute	born in the purple
to the manner born	the Vatican
Ichabod	the Kremlin
the Ides of March	the Hague Tribunal
Greek gifts	the Rialto
halcyon days	the nebular hypothesis
Lares and Penates	the Ptolemaic theory
the sword of Damocles	the Julian calendar
the Woolsack	Mendel's law
like Buridan's Ass	Grub Street
a red-letter day	Charing Cross
God's acre	Mayfair
in Abraham's bosom	Vanity Fair

the Dayspring from on high	apple of Sodom (Dead Sea
an Ishmaelite	fruit)
the fleshpots of Egypt	Ultima Thule
from Dan to Beersheba	Mahabharata
Procrustean bed	Pillars of Hercules
ex-cathedra	Sir Galahad
Barkis is willin'	swan song
what will Mrs. Grundy say	Tommy Atkins
the Pierian spring	Valhalla
Pegasus	Mrs. Partington
Nobel Prize	David and Jonathan
laissez faire	Tannhauser
Gordian knot	on the knees of the Gods
Phi Beta Kappa	Nibelungenlied
a sop to Cerberus	Downing Street
tuft-hunting	ultra vires
to set the Thames on fire	Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
to run with the hare and	the Slough of Despond
hunt with the hounds	the Delectable Mountains
noblesse oblige	the Nicene Creed
Sturm und Drang	the Colosseum
Kulturkampf	Arcadia
Zeitgeist	the Quirinal
Scylla and Charybdis	Gregorian Chant
a posse comitatus	the Stabat Mater
Mason and Dixon's line	and others too numerous to
the Pre-Raphaelites	mention.
the Man of Destiny	

## VIII. IGNORANCE OF DICTIONARY WIDESPREAD

It is almost inconceivable that an authoritative work of reference so extensive in its scope, so varied in its contents as the dictionary, should be all but unknown to the great run of students

and readers. Yet that this is the fact admits of not the slightest doubt. Innumerable instances could be cited in support of the statement.

### A BUSINESS MAN

"Ah," said the manager of a great industrial corporation the other evening, greeting a friend, a college instructor, at dinner, "I have been waiting to see you for weeks." "Tell me," he added, laying a newspaper clipping before his guest, "is that true?" The clipping was to the effect that the commonly heard expression *a setting hen* was incorrect; that the correct expression was *a sitting hen*. "I wanted to spring it on Bennett," explained the exponent of efficiency, "but I thought I'd make sure of my ground first." He had been waiting for weeks for "authoritative" information on this matter, yet in his office, close to his elbow, was one of the most scholarly English dictionaries ever published, a dictionary which cost its publishers something like a million dollars to issue.

### A COLLEGE STUDENT

Another instance. A third-year student at the University was corrected for using the word *suspicion* as a verb (e.g., "They were *suspicioned* of furnishing information to the enemy"). The



student accepted the correction, though it was evident he was not wholly convinced. At the next meeting of the class he called the instructor's attention to the fact that "the dictionary" sanctioned the use of the word *suspicion* in the sense in which he had used it. He was perfectly honest about it and, in support of his assertion, read a copy of the entry in some dictionary he had consulted. The class was not only convinced, it was delighted. The copied extract was brought forward that the instructor might verify with his own eyes the evidence offered. The quotation read:

**suspicion**, *v.t.* To regard with suspicion ; suspect. (*Dial.*)

The instructor called attention to the italicized word in parenthesis that followed the definition, and asked its significance. The student was genuinely puzzled, but finally hazarded the guess that the expression had the support of the *Dial*! We will not multiply instances, but the following cannot be passed over. A candidate for the Master's Degree confessed that just before the hour set for her examination she had travelled nearly a quarter of a mile to the university library to look up the definition of the figure known as *polysyndeton*. The first fourteen text-books on rhetoric consulted made no mention of it. The

fifteenth defined the term briefly but gave no examples. The search occupied the better part of an hour. When asked why she had not consulted the dictionary, her answer was significant. She was under the impression that the dictionary did not define technical terms. And this from a candidate for the Master's Degree in English!

If the instances just cited were only occasional occurrences, they would have little meaning for us. But they are the commonplaces of classroom experience. And in that very fact lurks a danger. Instructors have come to regard this condition of things as inevitable, and fail to react as they should. They fail to hold students responsible for errors in the mechanics of composition. The correcting of themes, therefore, has come to mean pointing out mistakes in spelling, capitalization, word-division, confusion of inflectional forms, barbarisms, solecisms, improprieties. As a consequence little time is left for the real problems of composition.

### THE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

In the *Educational Review* for September, 1915, there is an article by W. H. Sanders entitled, "The High School Student and the Dictionary." The author took a group of 125 students, all of whom, with the exception of nine, were

graduates of high schools. To these students he put eleven simple questions on the use of the dictionary. Only three students got as much as 50 per cent. One of the questions asked concerned the key-line. The question was a simple one: "Where is the key-line to be found on the dictionary page and what is the use of it?" One hundred and twelve students out of the 125 knew nothing whatever about it. When it came to "guide words" and their use the showing made was scarcely any better. Eighty-one knew nothing about them. On the question: "What device does the dictionary employ to indicate a hyphenated compound?" 125 failed absolutely. The commonest abbreviations used in the dictionary were ludicrously misinterpreted. The abbreviation for architecture (*Arch.*) was held to mean many things, among them "Archbishop," "landscape," "archipelago." The abbreviation *A.S.* (Anglo-Saxon) was interpreted to mean "answer soon." The constantly occurring contraction used to indicate obsolete words (*obs.*) was thought to mean "obscene." The abbreviation *viz.* is surely not confined to dictionaries, yet it was variously interpreted to mean "between," "against," "vice versa." But the great heart of a great nation will go out to the student who wrestled manfully with the abbreviation *cf.* To him (or was it to

many of them?) it meant just one thing—center field!

## IX. THE DICTIONARY A BETTER GUIDE THAN PURISTS

An attentive reader of the preceding pages must have found himself asking more than once, "Why is it that in matters of usage the dictionary is to be preferred as a guide to most of the separately issued manuals of style with which the public is more or less familiar?" Or, perhaps, he may put his question in a still more telling form and ask, "Should not the opinion of some noted writer or scholar on a question of usage take precedence over the anonymous entry in even the most reputable of our dictionaries?" "Should not, for instance, the judgment of such writers as Walter Savage Landor, Richard Grant White, Dean Alford, Archbishop Trench, be given preference over the mere entry in a dictionary?"

The answer to this question brings us back again to a consideration of the principle of good use. Good use, as we have already seen, is based upon the practice of the cultivated among our contemporaries. Among the educated and cultivated of every epoch will always be found persons of strongly individualistic tendencies. These persons—some of them highly gifted in special



directions—will often exhibit strong preferences for particular expressions, and equally strong prejudices against others. Literary history teems with examples of this personal attitude towards words and phrases. Now, if these preferences and prejudices are not shared in, or acted upon, by the majority of the educated among one's contemporaries, they remain interesting examples of personal likes or dislikes, but they do not influence the standard of usage. This standard is based upon the use of words and constructions which reputable speakers and writers *as a body* understand and approve. In other words, good use rests upon a consensus of opinion. Now it is this consensus of opinion (as it finds expression in practice) that it is the duty of lexicographers to ascertain and record. When the record has been properly made, it cannot be offset by the contrary opinion of any individual, however gifted he may be.

But do the dictionaries always succeed in recording this reputable opinion correctly? Generally speaking, the modern dictionaries do. Here and there, of course, mistakes may be detected, but the record as a whole well merits our confidence. Surely the staff of our modern dictionaries, comprising, as it does, a large number of trained scholars, has many more chances of get-

ting this record right than has the individual who is forced to rely upon his own limited observations, colored, as these often are, by his preconceived opinions as to what is correct.

### WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR

In the pronouncements of Walter Savage Landor we have a case in point. Landor was one of the most considerable men of letters of the first half of the nineteenth century. In the history of English literature he occupies a conspicuous and distinguished place. As a prose writer he belonged to a small but brilliant group that has left its impress upon English style. It is said of him that "he could not write a note of three lines which did not bear the mark of his 'Roman hand' in its matchless and inimitable command of a style at once the most powerful and the purest of his age." He was a master of epigram and of satire, and he has been described by a competent critic of English literature as "the master virtuoso" of his age in the field of English classical poetry. No less a critic than De Quincey deems the character of Landor's "Count Julian" worthy of a place beside the "Satan" of Milton and the "Prometheus" of Aeschylus.

In short, there were but few among Landor's gifted contemporaries or among his immediate

successors who attained his eminence in so many different departments of literature. To many, indeed, it must have seemed that here was a man peculiarly fitted to pass unerring judgment upon questions of style and matters of usage. And it seemed so to Landor himself. Yet his views concerning idiomatic English, and in regard to usage generally, are among the most whimsical and extravagant of which we have record. These views the reader will find in three of his "Imaginary Conversations." Two of these are between Johnson and Horne Tooke, and the third is between Archdeacon Hare and Walter Landor.

#### LANDOR'S PRONOUNCEMENTS

In these dialogues Landor gives us a long list of vulgarisms, solecisms, and improprieties—of expressions which in his opinion mar and disfigure the beauty of spoken and written English. Among the expressions he has singled out for adverse comment are some of the oldest and most firmly established idioms in the language. Of course, *had rather* and *had better*, those hardy and impenitent offenders in the eyes of all purists, are given short shrift. In order to account for them Landor, as is fitting in an "Imaginary Conversation," endows them with an imaginary origin, and this origin has been the stock-in-trade

of purists from that day to this. Another locution of which he disapproves is *under the circumstances*. "Circumstances are *about* us, not *above* us," consequently we can't be under them. The phrases *all the better*, *all the greater*, are in his eyes, no better than "sweepings from the servants' hall." The idiomatic *many a one* strikes him as being "the oddest expression in our language." As examples of "the coarseness and clumsiness of Middleton" he singles out: "I did not *take him to be* a rascal." "The occasion was so *pat*." "He seems to be hard *put to it* for a pretext." And the phrase *for good and all* puts him in mind of a type of expression which combines "both vulgarity and ignorance." A little farther on we are told that "there are properly no such words as *resistless*, *relentless*, *exhaustless*," because "all adjectives ending in *less* . . . are formed from substantives." Such expressions as *a most careless servant*, *a most thoughtless boy*, he is inclined to regard as "vicious," though in deference to the practice of celebrated writers he is constrained to soften the epithet and content himself with weaker terms of disapproval, such as "inelegant," and "unhappy."

"We write *island* with an *s*," remarks Landor, "as if we feared to be thought ignorant of its derivation." It would scarcely be possible to



make a wilder guess or a more misleading statement. The *s* in *island* instead of attesting knowledge of the derivation of the word, attests ignorance of it. Indeed, it would almost seem as if the editors of the New International Dictionary must have had this blunder of Landor's in mind when, after giving the etymology of the word, they add: "The *s* is due to confusion with isle." In another place Landor objects to the use of the word *execute* in the sense of "hanging," "beheading," or otherwise "putting a man to death." Such a use of the word he brands an impropriety. This arbitrary ruling taxes the patience of Professor Lounsbury who remarks: "He [Landor] clearly knew nothing of the origin of this usage. He was probably as ignorant as he was certainly unmindful of the fact that, from the fifteenth century on, it is to be found in the works of every writer of English, good or bad, who has had occasion to describe the act denoted by it. His objection never influenced nor could influence the action of any one who was at all familiar with the best usage, but it reveals unmistakably the limitations of the objector."

#### POSITIVENESS WITHOUT ACCURATE KNOWLEDGE

The significance of all this can be put in a nutshell. Landor's is one of the greatest names

in nineteenth century literature. No critic of English usage since his day to the present can compare with him as a writer. Yet any of our reputable dictionaries—the New International, the Standard, the Century, the Oxford English Dictionary—is a safer guide to “correctness” than are his positive pronouncements concerning *had better*, *had rather*, *under the circumstances*, *many a one*, *relentless*, etc. Landor’s positiveness in these matters was out of all proportion to his knowledge of linguistic phenomena. It seems difficult for most persons to realize that literary skill and a knowledge of the science of language are two very different things, though no one has any difficulty in understanding that a man may be a skilful musician without knowing anything of the physical theory of harmony, or of the history of the instrument upon which he plays.

#### ARCHBISHOP TRENCH

Landor lived to see published three books which were destined to give a new direction and a more solid foundation to verbal criticism. These books were “The Study of Words,” “English Past and Present,” and a “Select Glossary of English Words.” Their author, Richard Chenevix Trench, afterwards Archbishop of Dublin, was one of the most painstaking scholars of his age.

It was his paper, "On Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries," read before the English Philological Society, that gave an impulse to the movement which resulted in one of the greatest achievements of English scholarship—the publication of the Oxford English Dictionary. Though Archbishop Trench was not the literary genius that Landor was, nevertheless he was the possessor of a singularly clear and attractive style, and this, coupled with a scholarship the soundness of which has never been questioned, gained for his books on English a popularity they have never lost. "The Study of Words" and "English Past and Present" have long since been given a place among our popular classics.

It is well, however, to recall that more than half a century has passed since these books first made their appearance, and that in the meantime etymological research has made great strides. It is not surprising, therefore, in checking off the Archbishop's conclusions by means of the data furnished us more recently by the Oxford Dictionary, to find that many of the statements made in "The Study of Words," and in "English Past and Present," stand greatly in need of correction. These errors, though they do not seriously affect the value of the volumes referred to, nevertheless should warn teachers of English against making

statements like the following, recently attributed to one of their number: "I never look up a word in the dictionary if that word has been dealt with by Trench." Such a statement shows loyalty rather than discernment.

### CRITICS OF LESSER NOTE

Now, if the pronouncements of men of such eminence as Walter Savage Landor and Archbishop Trench—one a genius, the other a noted scholar—do not take precedence over the anonymous entries in our reputable dictionaries, what shall we say of the confident assertions in regard to usage made by men of lesser note: Richard Grant White, "Alfred Ayres," Dean Alford, and Ambrose Bierce? As for that host of anonymous verbal critics who invent anecdotal etymologies or who retail through the newspapers the exploded theories of early romancers—against these, we should always be on our guard.

### RICHARD GRANT WHITE

It has been said of Landor's pronouncements that they would be less dangerous if they were invariably wrong. This statement is equally true of the writings of most purists. A reader of Richard Grant White, for instance, may cover twenty pages at a stretch without encountering



anything more startling than the commonplaces of elementary rhetoric. On the twenty-first page, however, the author may suddenly fall foul of some perfectly legitimate expression and raise a tremendous hullabaloo about it. The offending expression may have behind it the accepted usage of centuries, or it may be an idiomatic construction that has entered into the very tissue of our speech. To the purist these facts either make no difference, or they constitute an aggravation of the offense.

Take, for instance, White's denunciation of *is being* (e.g., "The house *is being* built"). With a fury peculiar to purists Mr. White pursues this last-mentioned locution through thirty pages of his volume entitled "Words and Their Uses," pelting it at every convenient turn with epithets chosen with a view to damaging it in the sight of his readers. He begins his attack in the following manner (the italics are ours):

In *bad eminence*, at the head of those intruders in language . . . . stands out the form of speech "is being," which about seventy or eighty years ago began *to affront the eye, torment the ear, and assault the common sense* of the speaker of plain and idiomatic English.

Further, we read: "*The full absurdity of this phrase, the essence of its nonsense*, seems not to have been hitherto pointed out." It is "*a mon-*

*strosity, the illogical, confusing, inaccurate, unidiomatic character* of which I have at some length, but yet imperfectly set forth." Moreover, "*it means nothing, and is the most incongruous combination of words and ideas that ever attained respectable usage in any civilized language.*" Elsewhere it is referred to as a *fantastic solecism*, an *absurd affectation*, and as a *deformity of language*. Finally, it is disposed of by attributing it to *some precise and feeble-minded soul, some pedantic writer* of a former generation.

#### INVECTIVE NOT CRITICISM

There is a good deal of unnecessary heat about all this, and the calling of names contributes little to our understanding of the merits of the question at issue. The excerpts quoted are, however, important from another point of view. They illustrate the method by which verbal critics intimidate their readers. When arguments fail the critics resort to invective. In this particular instance the construction attacked by Mr. White has excellent authority behind it, and is often employed to prevent ambiguity. Such well-known authorities in language as Fizedward Hall, Professor W. D. Whitney, Professor Lounsbury, T. L. K. Oliphant, and Professor Henry Bradley of the Oxford Dictionary, pay scant at-

tention to the petulancies of Mr. White and give the expression a clean bill of health. Our best dictionaries reflect this authoritative opinion and the usage upon which it is based.

The matter has been briefly and concretely summed up by Professor Haney in the following passage:

For several generations grammarians have debated whether we should say "The house is building" or "The house is being built." The first form has the authority of age, the second happens to be more popular. It seems best to recognize both forms and to follow accepted usage. "Wheat *is selling* at a dollar" is preferred to "Wheat *is being sold* at a dollar." On the other hand "While we *were being taught*" is preferred to "While we *were teaching*" which is plainly ambiguous. Will tradition compel us to say "The child is spanking" when as a fact "The child is being spanked"?

About the word *execute* in the sense of putting a person to death in conformity to a legal sentence, Mr. White is just as positive and just as wrongheaded. He follows Landor in branding as wrong the use of this word in the sense just noted. The fact that behind the usage he condemns is the accepted practice of centuries, gives him not a moment's pause. He arrogantly sets up his own private opinion against the judgment of the race, and has nothing but contemptuous epithets for a form of expression which has been in good use for five hundred years. This use he

calls "vicious," and warns his readers to reject it "because it produces sheer nonsense." Farther on he refers to it as a "perversion," and flatly declares that it has no "justification." Writers who use "executed" to mean "hanged," "beheaded," "put to death," really "declare the performance of an impossibility," etc.

A few other instances of Mr. White's arbitrary and dogmatic rulings may be noted in passing. In the word *editorial* he finds an "unpleasant Americanism" for "leader." The use of the word *loan* as a verb plainly irritates him. With the sweet reasonableness that characterizes so many of his statements, he tells us that only snobbishness or ignorance can account for the practice. "The word," he continues, "is the past participle of the Anglo-Saxon verb *laenan*, to lend, and therefore of course means lent." We will not pause longer upon this passage than to quote the judgment of one of the ripest English scholars America has produced. "It is not easy to imagine," says Lounsbury, "what possible conception of the forms of Anglo-Saxon verbs could ever have suggested such an impossible derivation. It implies not merely the ignorance of a particular word, but of a whole part of speech."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Lounsbury, *The Standard of Speech*, page 203.



ALFRED AYRES—"THE VERBALIST"

When we pass from Richard Grant White to "The Verbalist" of "Alfred Ayres," we come to a book that has had a wide circulation in America and one that is still regarded in many quarters as an infallible guide to correct English. Like many books of its class, "The Verbalist" comes to us heralded by highly complimentary press notices. One review says:

This is the best kind of English grammar. It teaches the right use of the mother-tongue by giving instances of the wrong use of it, and showing why they are wrong.

Another judgment reads:

Mr. Ayres' lessons are conveyed in sharp, crisp English, and are examples of good as well as a warning against bad writing and speaking.

So the praises run through a dozen or more notices, the last of which concludes as follows:

It would take hours to point out the sharp and profound distinctions of the author of this ingenious and most useful work. We may provoke inquiry for the volume itself when we say that, judged by his high standard, very few men, even the greatest, have written or write with an exactitude required by Mr. Ayres. There is no question that he is correct in a majority of cases, and no man, however accomplished, can study this book without profit. We do most cordially commend it to all who care to speak and write correctly.

## STRANGE OPINIONS

This is high praise but a dispassionate examination of the book scarcely justifies it. Opening the volume at random we discover, with a sudden sinking of the heart, that there is no such thing as *ice-cream*! This is what Mr. Ayres has to say:

As for ice-cream, there is no such thing, as ice-cream would be the product of frozen cream, i.e., cream made from ice by melting. What is called ice-cream is cream *iced*; hence, properly, *iced* cream and not *ice-cream*.

There's argument for you! It reads for all the world like a malicious burlesque of the proceedings of a cross-roads debating society. And the principle underlying it can be applied so easily. Take any series of compounds you will, and notice how cleverly it works out. Since a "butter ball" is a ball made of butter, it follows (according to Mr. Ayres' argument) that a *butterfly* must be a fly made of butter, and a *butter knife* a knife made of butter, etc. Imagination reels at the Ayresian explanation of the term *garbage man*!

Under the term *o'clock* we have the following entry:

"It is a quarter *to* ten o'clock." What does this statement mean, literally? We *understand* by it that it lacks a quarter of ten, i.e., of being ten; but it does not really mean that. Inasmuch as *to* means toward, it *really* means

a quarter after nine. We should say, then, a quarter *of*, which means, literally, a quarter *out of* ten.

But if we "understand" by the expression just what Mr. Ayres says we do, how can it "really mean" something quite different? Language is a matter of convention. Words have no "inherent" meaning. They mean what they are intended to mean by the speaker and understood to mean by the hearer.

Mr. Ayres objects to the expression *you are mistaken*, on the ground that it might be taken to mean "I mistake you." He, therefore, urges his readers to use the expression, "You mistake." Under the word *dearest* Mr. Ayres quotes with approval the following:

A gentleman once began a letter to his bride thus: "My *dearest* Maria." The lady replied: "My dear John, I beg that you will mend either your morals or your grammar. You call me your '*dearest* Maria'; am I to understand that you have other Marias?"

We feel that it would be somewhat indelicate to inject ourselves into this controversy, yet we are convinced that Maria "mistakes." Under *less* we have the following:

This word is much used instead of *fewer*. *Less* relates to quantity; *fewer* to number. Instead of, "There were not *less* than twenty persons present," we should say, "There were not *fewer* than twenty persons present."

These sweeping generalizations of the purists may

easily be pressed too far. "Most of us," writes Professor Haney, "would not say 'He left the room *fewer* than five minutes ago' or 'We were able to sell this improved article for *fewer* than ten cents.' Observe the incorrect use in 'Mr. Jones went west and in fewer than six years he made a fortune!'" Mr. Ayres also disapproves of the expression *somebody else's hat*. "It is better grammar and more euphonious," he argues, "to consider *else* as being an adjective, and to form the possessive by adding the apostrophe and *s* to the word that *else* qualifies." In other words we should say: "somebody's *else hat*." It would be quite as idiomatic to say "Alexander's the Great empire," or "Richard's the Third horse."

#### THE EVIDENCE REVIEWED

We have been compelled to fetch a wide circuit but we now return to the point whence we started, to the question, namely: Should not the opinion of some noted writer or scholar on a question of usage take precedence over the anonymous entry in the most reputable of our dictionaries? Should not, for instance, the judgment of a writer like Walter Savage Landor, Archbishop Trench, Richard Grant White, Dean Alford, "Alfred Ayres," or Ambrose Bierce, be given preference over the mere entry in a dictionary?



From the survey we have just made it must now be evident that a man may be a noted critic, or even a famous author, and still be a very unsafe counsellor in matters of usage. As a rule his performance will be far more valuable than his precept. Literary history furnishes many examples of distinguished authors who have given utterance to very whimsical and arbitrary judgments concerning language. It follows, therefore, that a reputable dictionary is often a safer guide to usage than the pronouncements of authors and purists.

## X. NOT ALL DICTIONARIES OF EQUAL VALUE

The use of the word *reputable* in the last sentence calls for a word or two of explanation. Readers have, doubtless, been wearied beyond measure with the constant recurrence of this term in connection with the word *dictionary*. Yet the term is used advisedly. To not more than three of our American dictionaries<sup>17</sup> can the word be properly applied. As to the dictionaries in use in our schools, and throughout the country generally, far too many of them are worthless. They are not only unreliable as guides in matters of

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<sup>17</sup> Webster's New International, published by G. & C. Merriam Co.; the New Standard Dictionary, published by Funk & Wagnalls Co.; and the Century Dictionary, published by The Century Co.; and to the authorized abridgments of these works.

usage, but they are positive hindrances to the acquisition of good English. Our school authorities display commendable solicitude in seeing that their charges are provided with suitable textbooks in arithmetic, geography, history, etc., but when it comes to dictionaries the pupils are permitted to buy any volume which has the word "dictionary" stamped across its back. The value of what they buy may be made clear by an examination of one or two of the most popular brands on the market.

We single out for examination one of the most widely used "dictionaries" in California. If the sales of this dictionary throughout the United States are in proportion to the sales of the book in California, there must be millions of copies in use. And there is every reason to believe that such is the case.

The book to which we refer may, for all we know, go under several aliases, but for the sake of convenience we shall refer to it here as "The Collegian's Dictionary."

#### A POPULAR DICTIONARY EXAMINED

A cursory examination of this "work" shows that almost every mistake it is possible for a dictionary to make may be found exemplified in its pages. These errors include mistakes in spell-

ing, in capitalization, in the hyphening of compounds, in the indication of the status of foreign words, in the inclusion (unmarked) of slang, in the disregard of idiom—in short, they include, as has been said, almost every mistake it is possible to make in the use of words. Surely such a book should not be placed in the hands of school children, nor should school-teachers and the public generally be encouraged to buy it. A person who would unquestioningly accept the data furnished him by this “dictionary” would be betrayed into making many ludicrous and humiliating mistakes.

Most readers would suppose that a work so hopelessly defective as this so-called dictionary would receive little countenance from school authorities. But in supposing this they would be sadly mistaken. The president of the board of education, for instance, of a city of half a million inhabitants, writes a letter commending the work to the attention of students and teachers and *urging its use in every school!* The principal of one of the oldest and largest commercial schools in the community writes to say of this book that he considers it “one of the most useful of all dictionaries.” Prominent teachers, well-known clergymen, and public officials, vie with each other in the extravagance of their praise of a dictionary

which, as we shall show, cannot even spell correctly—of a dictionary the vocabulary of which swarms with errors and reeks with slang. We will give a few examples.

### ITS VOCABULARY

If the reader is seeking a term which will designate a person whose ventures are made on a small scale and in a timid way, he will find that term in "The Collegian's Dictionary." According to that authority one may, with perfect propriety, refer to such a person as a *piker*. The entry that follows this word illustrates how this so-called dictionary lures its victims on to their undoing. In this entry there is nothing to indicate that the word *piker* is merely a gambler's sneer reduced to print, nothing to warn the reader that it is the slang of the race-track and of the curb, and that it is used only in a contemptuous and disparaging sense. In fact, so far, if "The Collegian's Dictionary" tells us anything, it tells us that *piker* is as legitimate and as refined an expression as any in the language—that, as a word, it is as reputable as *home, friend, town, mother*.

Dipping again into this well of English, not altogether undefiled, we find that *claret* is an acceptable synonym for "blood," that *chesty* is a good English equivalent for *vain*, that *swell* may,



with propriety, be used as an adjective, and that the editors, presumably, would see nothing objectionable in the sentence, "His clothes were *swell*." From this onward the descent is easy and rapid. *Swipe*, as a verb, in the sense of "to steal," is listed as a reputable expression and passed without comment. *Booze*, we are told, is an acceptable synonym for "liquor"; as a verb it means "to drink immoderately." According to the volume before us, should a man be given to immoderate drinking, he may be spoken of as *soaking*; should he be undeniably drunk the correct expression is *loaded*.

### DEFINITIONS

The definitions in the volume we are examining are in keeping with its vocabulary. The word *Miss* is defined as a title of address prefixed to the name of an unmarried "lady"! The definition of *damosel* deepens and enriches the content of that term in a most unexpected way. We quote:

*damosel*, *n.* Formerly a damsel, or the wife of a squire. (Peace, Rossetti, peace!) The definition of *bar sinister* follows:

*bar sinister*, *n.* Heraldic term, meaning a bar drawn from the upper left corner of a shield to the lower right corner; usually indicating illegitimate birth.

The editors are mistaken. There is no such term known to heraldry. Nor could the contraption described in the definition be represented on a coat-of-arms for the simple and sufficient reason that a *bar* can be neither “dexter” nor “sinister.”

*Bunch*, we are told, used as a transitive verb, means “to present a lady with a bouquet”! Under *Armageddon* (spelt, by the way, with a small *a*) we have the following choice specimen of up-to-date lexicography:

**armageddon** (ar-mag’ ed-don), *n.* Great battlefield of Palestine; applied by Roosevelt to his progressive propaganda.

We will not pause over a definition that can find in *Armageddon* only a designation for a geographical area, but will hasten to rescue our late President from the ridiculous position in which the editors of this dictionary would place him. As an educated man, and one skilled in the use of English idiom, Colonel Roosevelt would as soon have thought of “applying Armageddon” to his Progressive propaganda as he would have thought of “applying” Gettysburg to a can of tomatoes, or Bunker Hill to a jackrabbit.

*Spat* is defined as “the spawn of shell-fish, especially the oyster.” Then we are told that the plural of the word in this sense is *spatterdashes*! Fancy (if you can) the “spatterdashes” of oys-

ters! The imagination of even a Lewis Carroll would have recoiled from that as a grotesquerie passing the limits of human extravagance.

### UN SOUND GUIDES

More than once, in our examination of this volume, we have been almost forced to the conclusion that the editors were a group of wags perpetrating a gigantic hoax upon an unsuspecting public. But one glance at the solemn and pretentious "Preface" dispels the illusion. In that part of the book we are told that

All in all, the "Collegian's Dictionary" is the latest, completest, most comprehensive and best work of its kind that has ever been published in the English language and is so conceded by the authorities in lexicography to whom it has been submitted.

No, we should not deceive ourselves. The editors are very much in earnest and mean to be taken seriously. And the pity of it is that the public does take them seriously, and that the children in our schools are learning that *piker*, and *chesty*, and *rhino*, and *chink*, are reputable words, and that *swell* may, with propriety, be used as an adjective, and that *bunch*, as a transitive verb, means "to present a lady with a bouquet," and that oysters have *spatterdashes*!

Other errors are distressingly numerous and

take a variety of forms. Sometimes we encounter misspelling as in the case of *soi disant* which this dictionary spells *soi distant*! Moreover, the reader is constantly misled in regard to the status of foreign words. *Ci devant*, for instance, is listed as an English expression, so are *feu de joie*, *bête-noire*, *billet-doux*, *bijouterie*, *déjeuner*, *chef-d'oeuvre*, and many others. Mistakes in capitalization greet us at every turn. *Rubicon* is spelled with a small *r*, *Armageddon* with a small *a*, *Scripture*, meaning the books of the Old and the New Testament, is spelled with a small *s*; *Colosseum* (the Flavian Amphitheatre) is spelled with a small *c*; *gypsy* is spelled with a capital *G*; *Anglican*, a member of the Church of England, is spelled with a small *a*; *Cartesian*, the Latinized adjective from *Descartes*, is spelled with a small *c*; *Mass*, the service of the Eucharist, is spelled with a small *m*; *Mason*, a member of the Freemasons, is spelled with a small *m*; and so on, through a host of words too numerous to record.

### STRANGE SPONSORS

If we were forced to describe the volume in terms furnished by its own vocabulary we would describe it as a *soi distant* dictionary, and by that we would mean that it was very far from being a dictionary in any true sense of the term. In



fact, it is a very dangerous and misleading guide to either written or oral English. Nevertheless, the distributors of the book assert that it is recommended by the professors of Harvard, Columbia, Princeton, Cornell, and the University of Pennsylvania. And, sure enough, upon the title page of the volume we find the names of five well-known professors in the institutions just named. The most cursory examination of the work, however, gives evidence that these gentlemen could have had no hand whatever in the compilation of its strange and grotesque vocabulary. Nevertheless, the publication of their names in connection with a work of this kind gives the book a fictitious value, and thus betrays the confidence of thousands of serious students who have been taught to look to our educational experts for light and leading.

#### OTHER MISLEADING GUIDES

Worthless as is "The Collegian's Dictionary" as a guide to good use, it is scarcely worse than many others on the market. In fact, almost every mistake that has been pointed out in connection with the former volume may be found duplicated in kind, even to the absurdity of misspelling, in the pages of others of the class.

Many of these "school dictionaries" go through

the form of giving information while they really withhold it. Their definitions read like a nursery game. We may quote from a volume that may here be referred to as the "Practical School Dictionary." In this "dictionary" *horse* is defined as a "quadruped"! *Bull* is comprehensively described as "an animal"! *Cow* is defined as "the female of the bull"! As definitions, these attempts would provoke a smile even in the nursery. Seriously to offer them to a pupil of school-age is to insult his intelligence. Yet collections of "definitions" of this sort are the only dictionaries with which the majority of our school children are acquainted. The possession of one of these collections of printers' jokes seems to satisfy the vague school requirement that "every pupil should have a dictionary and should learn to use it."

The definitions just quoted are not rare and exceptional lapses—they are typical. To enable the reader to see a little further into the mechanics of word-defining, as illustrated in dictionaries of this type, we will quote a few more examples from the same volume. These examples we shall arrange in groups of three:

1. *beetle*—an insect
2. *fly*—a winged insect
3. *butterfly*—a well-known winged insect

or again:

1. *sage*—a plant
2. *cabbage*—a garden plant
3. *tomato*—a well-known garden plant

or further:

1. *plum*—a fruit
2. *apricot*—a stone-fruit
3. *peach*—a delicious stone-fruit

Amidst the press of these “well-known” representatives of the animal and vegetable kingdoms there is, of course, danger that the humbler members may not receive the consideration that is their due. From this danger the editor does not always escape. It is true his keen eye discerns in the *beet* “a vegetable,” but the humbler *rhubarb* is to him merely “a cathartic” and it is nothing more. Moreover, the reader is often at a loss to discover just what principle guides the editor in his choice of *differentia*. This difficulty becomes strikingly evident when we bring together his definitions of two “well-known” insects. These definitions run as follows: *flea*—“a small insect”; *gnat*—“a small insect that bites.” Now, it is not the purpose of this paragraph to enlarge upon deficiencies in particular definitions, at the same time we cannot escape the conviction that there must have been something the matter with that flea!

### THE MENACE OF THE PSEUDO-DICTIONARY

There are millions of these pseudo-dictionaries in use and their number increases yearly. Their wide circulation throughout the country and their dissemination through every grade of our schools make them a grave menace to real educational progress. Students of political economy are familiar with a generalization known as Gresham's law. Popularly expressed Gresham's law is to the effect that "bad money drives out good." In other words, when a government permits a debased or inferior currency to circulate side by side with a sound currency, it is only a question of time when the good money will be driven out of circulation. Something not unlike this happens when school boards place these claptrap dictionaries upon a footing of equality with reputable dictionaries. The evil that results cannot be corrected by engaging high-salaried teachers of English. The best efforts of these instructors are constantly nullified by what, to the pupil, seems to be the indisputable "authority" of the printed word.

We are now better able to understand why persons of intelligence search frantically through grammars, and rhetorics, and manuals of style, for answers to questions which they might put to



any reputable dictionary. Time after time they have put such questions to these sham dictionaries and time after time they have closed these books with a sense of defeat, or else they have been betrayed into error. Is it any wonder they conclude that the dictionary is a broken reed against which they must not lean too hard? Is it any wonder that a correspondent should address a communication to the editor of the *Literary Digest* to the following effect:

I note President Hibben of Princeton is quoted as saying: "I am convinced that the fair name and honor of Princeton are at stake, and that we as Princeton men must *see clear* and *think straight* on this subject." Is that good English?

What this correspondent wishes to know is whether *clear* and *straight* may be used as adverbs. Any reputable dictionary will answer that question. Another correspondent sends a letter three thousand miles to the editor to ask what part of speech is *the* in the sentence: "*The* more we put into life *the* more we get out of it." Now it is more than probable that both these inquirers have access to good dictionaries. Yet their painful experience with the shortcomings and limitations of claptrap dictionaries has led them to believe that the information they sought lay outside the field of lexicography.

### THE ENCYCLOPEDIC CHARACTER OF THE DICTIONARY

In the preceding pages we tried to show something of the scope of the modern dictionary. We saw that it might profitably be consulted when troublesome questions arose concerning capitalization, syllabication, word-division, the form of compounds, irregular inflections, the status of terms borrowed from other languages, the choice of words as affected by the principle of good use, idioms, idiomatic phrasing, proverbial expressions, and allusions. Nor are these the only matters with which it deals, nor concerning which it may be consulted. Its range is so great that one may almost despair of framing a general statement that will do more than merely call attention to the great field which is covered. A few concrete illustrations may prove even more effective in indicating how diverse are the questions which a reader may put to a good modern dictionary.

#### A PSEUDO-ARCHAISM DETECTED

One example presents itself in connection with a practice that has become rather common in recent years—the practice of employing what are supposed to be picturesque archaisms to arrest attention. A typical instance is seen in shop signs which read: “Ye Olde Book Shoppe”—“Ye Sign

of Ye Swan.” Many educated persons in reading these inscriptions pronounce the first word *Ye*, as if it were identical in sound with the old form of the personal pronoun of the second person. As a matter of fact this *Ye* is pronounced exactly as if it were written *The*. The *Y* stands for an Old English character called “thorn” or “the thorn letter.” It was represented by the character þ, and had practically the same value as *th* in words like *thin* and *then*. To imagine, therefore, that Englishmen of the fourteenth century pronounced þe, as if it were spelled yee, is to give rein to a harmless fancy. It is well, however, to realize that in indulging in this antic we are not approaching “the quaint, archaic flavor of Early English.” We are merely making ourselves slightly absurd. The essential facts which are here summarized are all given in the dictionary, yet scarcely three persons in fifty would think of looking there for them.

#### WIDELY DIVERSIFIED INFORMATION

How many persons are aware that the following questions may be correctly answered by reference to the same source:

Was George Washington one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence?  
How old is Rudyard Kipling?

What were the Seven Wonders of the World?

In what state is the Arlington National Cemetery?

Where is the Riviera?

What is the significance of appointing a member of parliament to the Stewardship of the Chiltern Hundreds?

What is the rank of an officer in the United States Army whose shoulder straps show a gold leaf?—an eagle?

When was the Hague Tribunal erected?

What did the Bow Bells seem to whisper to Dick Whittington? Was the prophecy fulfilled?

Was Sir Walter Scott or Carlyle the creator of "Dry-as-Dust"?

Can a thief who breaks into a dwelling during the day be technically charged with burglary in the first degree?

When Stevenson chose the title "Virginibus Puerisque" for his volume of essays, did his choice of title indicate the audience he wrote for?

Who first used the expression, "the great unwashed"?

What author has given the adjective *Shavian* to the English language?

What are the Synoptic Gospels?

What did Russia cede to Japan by the Treaty of Portsmouth?

What celebrated American authors joined in the Brook Farm experiment?

What was the Oneida Community? When and by whom was it founded?

What was the outcome of the Expedition of the Seven against Thebes?

Where is Ypres? How is the name pronounced? Verdun?

In the English peerage does a viscount rank above or below an earl?



What is Taylor's theorem?

What is the City of Magnificent Distances?

What is Mendel's law?

How many constellations are north of the Zodiac?

Where is Mason and Dixon's line?

What is meant by Downing Street?

When did the British Crown come into possession of the famous diamond known as the Kohinoor? What was its original weight?

Why is Cupid sometimes called *Dan* Cupid, and Chaucer, *Dan* Chaucer?

What is the height of Bartholdi's statue, "Liberty Enlightening the World"?

What is meant by the "West Riding" of Yorkshire?

Where is the Taj Mahal?

When was Barebone's Parliament convened?

What was the Dred Scott Decision? The Missouri Compromise?

What is implied in the allusion to "The Three Tailors of Tooley Street"?

## XI. THE DICTIONARY OUR MOST COMPREHENSIVE READER'S HANDBOOK

Reiteration is a small price to pay for the object we have in view, namely, to bring home to the reader the conviction that the modern dictionary is something considerably more than a large lexicon. It is the most comprehensive reader's handbook ever published. And it is far more reliable than the average run of handbooks. To many persons who have been accustomed to pin their faith to certain popular reference books

this last statement may seem to call for proof. But the proof is not far to seek.

Before us, as we write, lies an open copy of Brewer's "Dictionary of Phrase and Fable." On page 826 of the edition before us, is the following entry:

**sirloin.** It is generally said that James I. or Charles II. knighted the loin of beef, but Henry VIII. had done so already. Dining with the abbot of Reading, he (Henry VIII.) ate so heartily of a loin of beef that the abbot said he would give 1000 marks for such a stomach. "Done!" said the king, and kept the abbot a prisoner in the Tower, won his 1000 marks, and knighted the beef. See Fuller, Church History, vi. 2, p. 299 (1665).

This is a very pretty story but it is not etymology. We quote it because it is typical of the kind of misinformation to which popular handbooks often give currency.

A little farther on we encounter the following:

**tramway.** A contraction of Outramway; so called from Benjamin Outram, who, in 1800, used stone sleepers at Little Eton, Derbyshire, instead of timber, to support the end of rails at their juncture.

Here again, the account is circumstantial enough but, unfortunately for Mr. Outram's fame, the word *tram*, in the sense of support or frame, was in use many generations before he was born. The

entries in the Oxford Dictionary carry us back to the sixteenth century. How long before that the word was in use nobody knows.

In accounting for the form of the word *snob* Mr. Brewer hazards the following:

The word is *s* (privative) and *nob* (noble).

This is extremely ingenious but it does not accord with the fact. In another place we find the following explanation of the phrase *to set the Thames on fire*:

The temse was a corn sieve which was worked in former times over the receiver of the sifted flour. A hard-working active man would not unfrequently ply the temse so quickly as to set fire to the wooden hoop at the bottom; but a lazy fellow would never set the temse on fire.

Admirable as is the moral of this little story, the editors of the Oxford Dictionary, with a curtness that is almost brutal, dismiss it as a conjecture that has no basis in fact!

The purpose of these quotations is not to discredit Brewer, but to dispel the illusion that hand-books of general information are to be preferred in their treatment of words and phrases to the dictionary. And the "general reader" is not the only one who falls an easy victim to this illusion. Teachers of English are sometimes tempted into strange paths in a mistaken effort to gain interest

at any cost. In a text-book of recent date—a manual devoted to the study of words, and intended for use in our schools—students are urged to supplement the information given in Webster's New International by reference to Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable. This is dubious counsel and points to an uncritical attitude on the part of the authors of the manual to which we allude—an attitude which permits them to accept without question the following fable:

Our language is full of words that have histories which few people stop to think about. For instance, who would suppose that there was anything worth noticing in the derivation of our common little word *king*? Yet Carlyle explains it as being merely an English form of the German *könig*, which comes from the root of the verb *können*, *to be able*. The *könig* or *king* is the *könning* or *canning* man—the man who is able, and who therefore rules his fellowmen.

Mistakes of this kind are so easily detected that it is a pity to see an otherwise useful and suggestive text-book marred by their inclusion.

#### AFFECTED SUPERIORITY TO THE DICTIONARY

In the days when fainting was fashionable, it was considered "good form" to affect a lofty superiority to the dictionary. The psychology of this period may be studied at leisure in Thackeray's "Book of Snobs." To us the period seems



far away and long ago, and most of its silly affectations have perished. Most of them, but not all. Even today in certain quarters we occasionally meet with an elaborate attempt to assume an air of crushing superiority to recorded usage. The attitude, we admit, is not without its picturesqueness, recalling, as it does, something delightfully quaint and early-Victorian. But in these days the pose, though picturesque, is difficult to maintain for any length of time without disclosing the length of one's ears.

#### IN CONCLUSION

If ignorance of the scope and use of the dictionary prevails to the extent we have indicated among high school and college students, there are good grounds for assuming that pupils in the lower schools have but a very meager and inadequate conception of the value of this work as a means for furthering their education in later life. And yet of all the books that find a place in a scheme of general education, what one is more fundamentally important than the dictionary? It is the first of the works of reference with which the beginner becomes acquainted, and it is the last with which the trained scholar can profitably dispense. Upon the use that we make of it depends much of the value of our reading and much

of the accuracy of our thinking. Indeed our college entrance examinations might very profitably substitute for some of the time-honored queries that now find place in their lists, a few general questions designed to test the student's critical use of this most important of aids to scholarly effort.

Nor can it be too often insisted upon that training of value in the use of the dictionary cannot be given through the medium of the small cheap lexicons with which the country is flooded. Thousands of these shoddy little word-books are annually issued by obscure publishers, generally printed from poor plates upon bad paper. As a rule they are untrustworthy guides in everything except, perhaps, spelling. Frequently their vocabulary terms are all printed with initial capitals; hence they have no means of calling attention to proper nouns and to the adjectives derived from them. In many of these so-called dictionaries of the cheaper grade, no attempt is made to distinguish between the different parts of speech, or to distinguish between transitive and intransitive verbs. Word-division is ignored. Owing to the small print, the poor plates, and the bad paper employed, the diacritical marks are so blurred in the impression as to be almost useless in the indication of vowel sounds. Finally,

the small, nondescript dictionary makes no attempt to explain words. What it does is to endeavor roughly to indicate the meaning of terms by a jumble of loosely assorted synonyms. Between the first of these "synonyms" and the last, in the list of equivalents given, there often exists a difference in meaning that amounts to a practical contradiction in terms. This characteristic of the small dictionary has long been made to yield its harvest of jokes in the columns of our comic papers.

Quite as unsatisfactory as the small lexicon, and decidedly more misleading, because more pretentious, is the large mongrel dictionary of the "bargain" type. Of works of this latter class there are several easily recognized varieties. These differ from each other chiefly in the color of their bindings. They resemble each other in the nature of the petty fraud they would perpetrate upon an unsuspecting but bargain-loving public. In almost every instance they claim to be *based upon* "Webster's Original Unabridged Dictionary revised and brought up to date by eminent English and American scholars." What this usually means is that the old 1847 edition of "Webster's Unabridged," upon which the copyright has long since expired, is reproduced word for word by a photographic process which in-

volves no type-setting and which cheerfully reproduces all the broken type, all the faulty etymologies and errors of proofreading, of a work that is now three-quarters of a century old. To this facsimile reproduction of an old and hopelessly out-of-date dictionary, unscrupulous publishers add supplements of doubtful value and tables of dubious statistics.

What we have said in the preceding pages applies, therefore, only to the best type of the large dictionary. Though its price is somewhat more than that of the claptrap dictionary, there is, in point of value, no comparison between them. To the general reader and to the professional student it is alike indispensable. It is the best investment in the way of books that a reader can make—more indispensable as an aid to education than any five-foot book shelf ever published. And the dictionary in the public library will never serve the same useful purpose as the dictionary that lies open at one's elbow.



